

Why Conversion Matters

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[0 : 0 0] The Acts of the Apostles, chapter 9, and the famous story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. If you have one of our church visitors' Bibles, you'll find it, I think, on page 917. But otherwise, you'll find it in the New Testament, after the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and then the Acts of the Apostles.

And chapter 9, then, we're going to read verses 1 down to verse 19. And it begins with Saul, the leader of the opposition to the early church, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

And he went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the way, that is the Christian 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.

[1 : 3 0] 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.

For 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.

[2 : 4 6] 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. Amen. May God bless to us this, his word. Well, it's a great delight to be in this place again.

I had such a warm welcome this morning, and I'm so grateful for that. My text is Acts 9, if you would have that open.

I don't know if, well, I'm sure you have the experience that I have. I'm not particularly musical. But sometimes you'll get a tune in your head, and you can't get it out again.

[3 : 59] And I'm rather like that with Acts 9. I've had this chapter in my mind for a couple of months or so, and I can't get it out of my head.

And so it's coming to you this morning as well. So that's a wonderful story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus to become Paul the great apostle.

So that's my text. Now, I hope you're going to follow me with your Bible if you have it there. My theme is this, why conversion matters.

Not just the conversion of Saul to become Paul, but why solid, real Christian conversions truly matter today, just as much as ever.

Now, before I get to this key question and plunge in, I want to add a word to that of the minister. I want to say thank you to everybody who supported our week.

[4 : 57] It was an enormous encouragement to me as a visitor from the south to see all these young men at this conference last week. I wish you could have looked in and seen us. It's a great hope for the future.

And many of you worked so hard to support it. I'm not sure that I can quite add a totally sincere thank you to those who baked. I think I heard the minister say that, because I shall have to go on a diet next week as a result of the excellent food we had.

But we had a wonderful time. And thank you for the courtesy and the generosity of this congregation in making it possible. It really was a tonic. And this beautiful building was a wonderful place to have it and to meet together.

So thank you for all that you did. I was a beneficiary and so were many other people. Right then, here's my question.

Why do conversions matter? But first, we must establish what Christian conversion really is. And what better place to do it than this supreme example in Acts chapter 9.

[6 : 03] Here is a real change. A cruel, brutal, violent man, a persecutor of the Church of God, turned into the great preacher, the great missionary, the great teacher.

Half the New Testament written by him. The man who took the gospel to the Gentiles. We are the Gentiles. Maybe it would never have come to Britain but for this remarkable man, Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul the Apostle.

This is a supreme example of what conversion is. And we're going to study it for our own help this morning. Now, of course, there are dramatic happenings in this conversion which are unique and are unrepeatable.

I don't think I need to go into that. The voice from heaven. The flashing light. The fact that this man was thrown to the ground. His blindness for three days. No food or drink.

That's all unforgettable. It's all very moving. But it was particular to that particular man and is not something for today. And if somebody comes up to me and tells me that they had a flashing light and Christ appeared to them, I wouldn't believe them.

[7 : 10] But what has struck me so forcibly in the last week or so, last month or so, is that in principle the change in this man is quite similar, indeed entirely similar, to what is experienced by every young convert to Christ.

By everybody who can say, I am a converted person, you will find that they had the same firm, strong, settled, even passionate convictions that came to this man.

Let me repeat that. The sign of Christian conversion is certain firm, strong, settled, even passionate convictions. And maybe as you listen this morning, I would like you to think, do I have these convictions?

And I'm sure that so many of you can say, yes, amen. Thank God, by his grace, I do. Now, Acts chapter 9 beautifully illustrates, as we have it open in front of us, three such convictions.

No doubt there are many more than three that every Christian holds, convictions about many things. But these, I think, are very instructive, and I think they're very reassuring.

[8 : 25] Here are the three. Strong, passionate convictions held firmly in mind and heart about, number one, about God's Son.

Secondly, about God's mercy. And thirdly, about God's people. Right, number one. And we do look at verses 22 to 24, which is just over the page, I think.

Yes, verse 20, at the bottom of the column. So, here is this man, an enemy of God, now met and changed by Christ.

And we read, 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 this 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.

[9 : 48] Now, I'm not saying that the young convert to Christ will be able immediately to baffle Orthodox Jews and bring them to faith in Christ in a moment.

That would be very strange. What I am saying is that conversion leads to a solid conviction that Jesus is the Son of God.

Let's clarify this great change. Let's follow Paul in our imagination on his rampage. We have certain clues, my friends, in 1 Corinthians 12, you could look this up afterwards, which give us an idea of what actually happened in the synagogue when Paul came.

I can imagine him arriving at the synagogue. By the way, the young Jewish Christians were still attending the synagogue. We're talking about very early days.

I imagine the leader of the synagogue welcoming Paul. He's a VIP and to say he's treated with great respect as a very important person. And the leader of the synagogue asks the apostle, not the apostle now, of course, the persecutor, ask him to stand up and say why he's come.

[11 : 07] And so Saul of Tarsus stands up and gives an impassioned talk about the threat of Jesus, the blasphemer, how he's destroying our laws, our traditions, our history, and he's got to be dealt with, and those who follow him have got to be destroyed.

And so, friends, Saul says to the synagogue, we're going to have an exercise now. Now, I'm going to ask you one by one to stand up and confess your share in rejecting this wretched Jesus.

And I'm going to give you a simple sentence to say. I want you to stand up and say, Jesus is cursed. So they do that and comes the time when the newly converted Christian, Jew has become a Christian, who's been trembling in his seat.

You can imagine it. And he stands up and he opens his mouth and he says, Jesus is, Jesus is Lord.

He's got a Christian, who's been murdered. Pretty good courage to do that. The result, arrested, hustled off to Jerusalem, imprisoned, and even in fear of death.

[12 : 27] This is actually what was happening. Terrifying. You might say that Saul of Tarsus was a kind of terrorist, a killer, a violent, raging animal. And then this violent, raging, horrible man stopped in his tracks.

Words from the risen Christ. Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting my people? No, he didn't say that.

Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? There's the Lord, the Lord of glory. Saul, what are you doing? Attacking me, hostile to me, the Lord of glory, the Son of God.

And the result of this great conversion, immediately he begins to preach in the synagogue, the very place where there is hostility. There again is courage for you. I don't think you can be a Christian without courage today.

If you can't stand for Christ as they did, then I think really you will find the Christian life is impossible. Now, exactly the same firm, passionate conviction that Jesus is Lord.

[13 : 42] That was their conviction and desires. Before we come to that, before we're converted, we may be apathetic. You may be a loudmouthed atheist.

Do you remember Paul Hitchens, the brother of Christopher Hitchens? He's wonderfully brought to a knowledge of God. I think he writes for one of the male titles.

Desperate for his brother to be converted before he died, though there is no knowledge that that was so. You may have been apathetic. You may have been an atheist. You may have been a nominal church goer.

But can you say Jesus is Lord and mean it and live by it? And, of course, it's not just a matter of saying it. It's not just a matter of belief and understanding.

Paul has a desire to go and tell people. Again, I don't think it's much good being a Christian with an orthodox faith if you don't want to share it with others who are so desperately in need of it. People need this Lord.

[14 : 37] And one of the marks of conversion is a longing to tell your friends and your family that Jesus is Lord. So is this, number one, your strong conviction?

Do you believe that he is the only way to God? Do you believe that Jesus now is at God's right hand? Do you believe that in the end every knee is going to bow before him, whether they like it or not?

And do you believe that when he comes, it will be to judge the whole world in righteousness? So this is number one hallmark of a converted person.

The sign of conversion. A universal hallmark. You could travel anywhere in the world, and if you meet a Christian congregation, and there must be so many million meeting today and every day, every true converted Christian there will acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God.

Number two. Paul straight away has a strong, firm conviction about God's mercy.

[15 : 49] I think I'll let him speak for himself. One Timothy, you may like to turn to it. I can't remember the page. One Timothy 1.12. I say to our congregation at home, page 3,221, in order to shame them that they don't know their way through the Bible.

But I'll help you as your Scotsman, 991. One Timothy 1.12. I think these are lovely words. I thank him.

One Timothy 1.12. 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, persecutor, an insolent opponent, but I received mercy because I'd acted ignorantly in unbelief.

And the grace, the amazing grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. I love this bit. It's so well known and yet so true and so important.

The saying is true and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. That was the reason for his coming, of whom I am the foremost.

[17 : 09] But I received mercy for this reason. And so on. Do you notice that twice? I received mercy. I was shown mercy. Now, my friends, you know as well as I do, if you're a Christian person of experience, that by nature, unawakened by the Spirit, the natural man relies for his acceptance with God on his own righteousness.

It is a fatal reliance, but it's everywhere to be found. I remember when I started in ministry, that is more years ago than I like to think, I soon came face to face with this as it was my job to confront people with the love of God.

I soon found that people were depending entirely upon themselves, their own righteousness, their own decency, their own good works. And sometimes it was quite ludicrous. Very early on, my rector asked me to go with the young people to take services in the local hospital.

This was at Sevenoaks and Kent. I soon discovered that the women's ward, I got a real welcome. Thank you, you ladies. You're always kind to young ministers who come and lead the service.

Very different in the men's ward at Sevenoaks, at least. They used to take cover behind the Sunday paper. Fairly enormous the Sunday papers were in those days.

[18 : 31] They still are. You need a suitcase to carry them, don't you? And they used to take cover behind it. And I wouldn't allow this. So after I had, we'd sung a few hymns, I'd read the Bible, given a short talk, I would walk around the beds.

And I would pull down a corner of the newspaper. And under that direct assault, this is the defense that I got. Well, I've never done anybody any harm.

So I got used to replying by saying, I'm sure you've done a great deal of harm to a great many people. Who do you think you are, he would say. You know, but what a silly thing to say. I've never done anybody any harm. Stand up, anybody in church who can say that.

No, of course you can't. And another response, I know this is ludicrous. I would pull down the paper. Well, I've always done my best. To which I would reply, I'm sure you haven't.

Well, who has? You know, living a kind of pathetic lie. Imagine going before God on the judgment day and saying these foolish things.

[19 : 36] Now, of course, we smile at that. And I suppose in some ways, that's not quite so important to do with our study today. But in the question of Saul of Tarsus, it really was serious, wasn't it?

Do you remember what he says again? I'll let him speak for himself in Philippians 3. He says, I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh.

That is, confidence as a religious man, as a Jew, to stand before God. And there are millions of people today, Jews including, who still have the same confidence.

Though I myself have confidence in the flesh. If anyone thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, says this man, I have more. And then he lists his reasons. They're not as stupid as they're men in the war, of course.

They're serious. And they were true as far as they went. Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin. A Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the law of Pharisee, as to zeal of persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

[20 : 44] And then the awakened Paul talks. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss.

Because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things. And count them as rubbish. In order that I may know Christ.

And let me tell you that the word rubbish there, in the original Greek, is a great deal ruder. I count them as filth. And even that is probably a too polite a translation of the original word.

Paul knew that depending on himself, depending upon his own righteousness, even though he was a great Jew and a teacher, that was nothing. To stand before God depending upon that as a proud Pharisee.

No, no. Instead, he submitted to the mercy of God and to baptism then and there. I delight in this story, by the way. I just, by the way, the way in which it's told.

[21 : 45] It's told three times in the Acts. And I've just turned to Acts chapter 22, verse 12. I want to show you why I delight in this. I imagine to myself how a Hollywood director would deal with this story.

It would all be hype, wouldn't it? And it would all be tremendously dramatic and the language would be exaggerated and so on. This is actually how the New Testament describes his baptism.

Acts 22 and verse 15. You will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.

And then I like verse 16. Why do you wait? Get up. Be baptized. Wash away your sins. Calling on his name. He doesn't show any reverence to this new convert.

I love that, don't you? Get up. Wash away your sins. Be baptized. It's almost the language of mother to a teenager coming into the room where he's oversleeping or she is oversleeping.

[22 : 54] Come on, get up. Wash. Get dressed or you'll be late for school. There's nothing especially religious about it. And I now says, God has met you. God has shown you mercy.

Well, now is the time to be baptized and to begin the Christian life. Some people need direct talk like that. And maybe there's somebody in church this morning who needs me to say to you, get up.

If you haven't been baptized, be baptized. Put your trust in Christ. You've been thinking about it long enough. Christ has spoken to you. You respond and turn to him this very day and confess him before men.

And confess that you needed that mercy. That you've been holding out in your pride and stupidity. Well, for the rest of his life, Paul never ceased to thank God for that mercy.

I think he probably grew in that, don't you? Every year of his life. Certainly I have. I don't think we realize when we begin our Christian lives just what, how much we need that mercy.

[23 : 57] I've been a Christian now for many years, nearly 70 years. And I feel the need of God's mercy more today than I did at the beginning. But for that mercy, we would not stand as Christians.

We'd not be able to witness. We'd not be able to work for Christ. I have a conviction. I hope you do. As Paul did that day. A conviction not only about God's son, but about God's mercy. It is the most wonderful thing.

Amazing grace. And now conviction number three. Paul also, almost immediately after his conversion, had a firm, solid conviction, persuasion about God's people.

And I think the change here is as astonishing as any of the others. Because here is a great teacher in Israel who from his childhood has been taught that Israel are the people of God.

His chosen race. For Saul of Tarsus brought up at the feet of Gamaliel. Well, nothing is more certain than that God has separated this people for himself and everybody else is outside the covenant.

[25 : 07] And now, almost in a moment, that has changed. In the language of the famous parable of the tenants, the vineyard has been taken away from Israel and given to others.

But who are these others to whom God has given the name of his special people, his chosen race? Well, later on, Paul describes the people of God in these words.

He says, normally, the makeup of the churches in those days, if you went into a service, there weren't many rich people there. There weren't many influential. Very few upper class people.

Hardly a celebrity in sight. Very few college people. Certainly no VIPs. Yes, they were a very ordinary people. Just imagine coming into Damascus.

This great man, for he was a great man in his way. Meeting God's people and thinking, well, this is no great shakes. Look at Acts chapter 9, verse 26.

[26 : 19] I think it's rather delightful. And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not without reason.

They were not sure of him, whether he was a Christian or not, but he was sure of them. What a change. Israel, no longer the people of God.

And this, well, I suppose to some, they seemed a very unimportant and unimpressive group. These are God's people. And today, true conversion always means that we begin to discover God's people.

True conversion means that we begin to want to join God's people. True conversion today, as ever, means we want to support God's people. We want to be with them. We want to give what we have got to give.

We want to find friendship and fellowship. We want to build God's people. When I was rector of St. Helens, I found this, and I'm sure my excellent successor finds exactly the same, that when many students would leave us after their course and go to some other city in Britain, and many of these students had been soundly converted to Jesus Christ, been reawakened, changed in that way, never as far as I remember did they say, can you find me a Baptist church in Nottingham?

[27 : 56] Or can you find me a Methodist church in Manchester? Can you find me an Anglican church, an Episcopal church? Now that wasn't the question, even though they might have come from that background.

The question was, can you tell me where I can find God's people? Can you tell me where I can find Christian fellowship? Can you tell me where I can find Bible teaching? Because they already become aware that you go through many a church door and find none of those things.

You go through many a church door, none of God's people, no Christian fellowship, no Bible teaching. That was the church I was brought up in. And it's sad.

Well, let's summarize then these initial convictions of the converted poor, and of converted men and women and young people ever since. Let me repeat.

Conversion, the mark of conversion, the mark of being awakened, the mark of being a real, living Christian believer, firm, strong, settled, heartfelt convictions.

[29 : 01] One, about God's beloved Son. Two, about God's amazing grace to you personally. You didn't deserve it and now you know it.

Three, about God's true people, his family on earth. You may have to search for them. They're not easy always to find. But when you find them, you find a family, brothers and sisters.

So the big question at last. The big question I started with and I will finish with. Why are real conversions so important and why do they matter so much?

Here is the answer. Real Christian conversions are the only guarantee, one, of faithful and effective Christian denominations.

Every school kid today knows very well that the old Western denominations have no respect amongst the ordinary people today.

[30 : 11] That they have failed in their mission, that they're not fit for purpose. Real conversions are the only guarantee of faithful, effective Christian denominations. Real conversions at the foundation, at the root, are the only guarantee of faithful and effective Christian congregations.

Without really converted people, a congregation is simply a formality. As it was at St. John, St. Castro and Lewis, when my faithful and good parents took my brother and myself along.

I think we knew there was nothing there. And of course, if that's so, usually one turns away for a lifetime from the things of God. Real conversions are the only guarantee of effective Christian denominations, of effective Christian denominations, congregations, and of faithful, effective Christian ministries.

That's why last week was so encouraging. Finding men with new life who want to go into Christian work and Christian ministry. Without these strong conversions, that is God's work in awakening us, regenerating us, indwelling us, denominations, congregations, ministries, will gradually be squeezed into the pattern of the world around them.

Ultimately, those denominations, those denominations, those congregations, those ministries, will be secularized in terms of belief and behavior. Faith will become relativized.

[31 : 45] Morals will become relativized. In a rather strange phrase that is very popular today, we shall find the worldly church and the secular world singing from the same hymn sheet.

Standing for the same things. And that, of course, is becoming plain for anyone with eyes to see. Worse than that, the worldly church, as we see in Judaism at the time of Paul, will sooner or later, and I want to assure you of this because it's important to realize it, the worldly church will come ultimately to oppress the people of God.

To reject God's unique and only Son as the only way to heaven. To reject God's mercy. That's astonishing, isn't it?

They won't remain apathetic. So, in the weekend papers, you know, there are so many of these stories today, isn't it? Dr. Richard Scott, a very good, ordinary GP, tells one of his patients that Christianity might help and is immediately, immediately taken to task by the General Medical Council.

I think that, as I look at this great chapter, I finish on this note. It's a very sad note, really. That, it's very ironic.

[33 : 09] That Paul, the violent persecutor, when he became a Christian and was wonderfully converted, becomes Paul the persecuted. In other words, once he becomes Christ's, people treat him as they treated his Lord and Master.

It is very remarkable, isn't it, to see that contrast. He enters proud, self-confident. He leaves by being let down in a basket through the city wall because people are after his blood.

Why do conversions really matter? They're the foundations of everything in the Christian Church. I think most of you know, many of you know it. I was the Rector of St. Helens in the City of London for 38 years.

I have a marvelous successor, and the work there is going on better than ever. Thank God. But a strange thing has happened. We're at the east end of the City of London. Nobody is allowed to build skyscrapers around St. Paul's at the west end of the City of London.

And so, these skyscrapers are growing all around St. Helens. In the end, there are going to be there, there, and there, the three tallest buildings in Europe.

[34 : 22] And the little St. Helens will be there in the middle. Overawed and overshadowed, I think, by these immense buildings. But what is said to us at the moment is that they're building the foundations.

And it takes months and months and months. They go deeper and deeper and deeper. And surely why? Because when you get up to whatever it is, the 524th floor, you need strong foundations.

Don't you? And so it is with the Church of God on earth. Unless we have strong foundations, what the world sees will be shaky, weak, and of little use.

Why do conversions matter? Because they're the foundations of God's work in the world. Are you part of that foundation? Have you got those convictions?

By God's grace, I hope you have. It will make for a happy and useful life. And a happy and useful and glorious eternity. So let's pray.

[35 : 24] Let's be quiet. I don't mind a few squeaks. It doesn't matter. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your great grace and mercy shown that day to a wretched, violent, hostile man.

Thank you that your power is the same today. To turn apathetic, atheistic, nominal Christians into the real thing. Grant to every one of us in this building today certainty about your Son, certainty about your mercy, and certainty about your people.

And translate that certainty, we pray, into action, into faithful living, and to happy and useful lives. And we ask it through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.