

THE MOST FAMOUS CONVERSION OF ALL TIME

Acts 9:1–31

I've entitled this message 'The most famous conversion of all time'. There have been other dramatic conversions through the course of church history but I don't think there is any that rivals the conversion of Saul of Tarsus for its sheer drama and impact.

The expression, 'a Damascus Road experience' has entered the English language as the perfect description of a life-changing transformation. But how should we understand Saul's conversion? Was this the pattern for all conversions or was it exceptional? Should *we* expect a Damascus Road experience or was this just for him? In a sense, the answer to both questions is 'Yes'. Yes, Saul's experience was unique and unrepeatable. There are elements of his conversion that will not be repeated in the lives of others. But at the same time there are elements of his conversion that are common to all conversions. Without them we could not say that a genuine conversion has taken place.

To have a genuine, Christian conversion we don't have to travel to Jerusalem and set off from there on the main route to Damascus. It's not the place that matters. We don't have to set our alarms to be ready for mid-day. It's not the time that matters. We shouldn't expect a blinding light or an ensuing blindness. We don't have to fast for three days. We don't have to have something like scales falling from our eyes. These were the things that were central to Saul's experience but as far as we know from church history they were unique, and not repeated in the conversion of others.

When we read on in the book of Acts to chapter 16 we find another very dramatic conversion. Saul, who is now known as Paul, the Christian emissary, is in Philippi. He has taken a strong stand against evil and as a result has stirred up the hatred of powerful enemies. He has been arrested, beaten mercilessly and thrown in jail. Around midnight he and his co-worker Silas are praying and singing hymns to God. The other prisoners are listening. They haven't heard anything like this before. Suddenly there's an earthquake. The foundations of the prison are shaken. At once all the prison doors fly open and everyone's chains come loose.

The jailer wakes up, assesses the situation immediately, works out that he's facing the death penalty himself now, and decides that by far the best option is to take his own life. Paul also grasps the situation and shouts out, 'Don't harm yourself! We're all here!' The jailer calls for lights. Amidst the dust and debris he discovers that it's true. No one has escaped. While the other prisoners are being secured he brings out Paul and Silas and says, 'Men, what must I do to be saved?' Paul says, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, and that goes for everyone in your household as well.'

Paul's conversion and the Philippian jailer's conversion were both extremely dramatic but as far as the details are concerned they could not be more different. For Paul it was at mid-day. For the jailer it was at midnight. For Paul it was on the open road when he was wide awake. For the jailer it was in his own room when he was fast asleep.

So is it the drama that marks a conversion as genuine? Earlier in Acts chapter 16 we read of Paul's arrival in Philippi. On the Sabbath he found a group of women who met to pray and he shared with them the good news of salvation in Jesus. One of them was a successful business woman called Lydia who was already a worshipper of God. We read that 'the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message'. She went on to describe herself simply as 'a believer in the Lord'.

No lights, no voices, no blindness, no fasting, no miraculous recovery of sight, no earthquake, no drawn sword. no danger. No drama. But was it a genuine conversion? Oh, yes.

Before we think about the essential factors that characterise every true conversion just think for a moment about these differences. They remind us that we are all different, unique in fact. There has never been anyone exactly like you before and there will never

be anyone exactly like you again. You are unique. God made you the way you are and God will meet you where you are. He knows you better than you know yourself and he loves you for the person you are.

But having said that, there are features of Saul's conversion that are essential to every Christian conversion. At the very heart of it was an encounter with the Lord Jesus.

1. An encounter with the Lord Jesus

Verses 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. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."'

We don't know if Saul ever saw Jesus during the days when he was alive on earth. There is a good chance that he had seen him in Jerusalem at festival time. He may have heard him speak. He certainly knew all about him and was convinced that his claim to be the Son of God was a blasphemy. He was convinced that the story of his resurrection was a lie. He hated the name of Jesus and he hated his followers. He was actively engaged in wiping out this fanatical sect who could only cause trouble.

But all that changed in one amazing instant. He had a personal encounter with the Lord Jesus. Jesus met him. Jesus spoke to him. Jesus questioned him. Jesus told him what to do.

Of course there were other factors. There was the fearless testimony of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and his dying prayer which must have etched itself into the mind of Saul. There was the warm welcome of Ananias, plucking up all his courage to visit the notorious persecutor and then swallowing all his prejudice and addressing him as 'Brother Saul'. Then there was the reconciling work of Barnabas when Paul the Christian finally made it to Jerusalem, only to find that no one trusted him, no one but Barnabas, that is.

However, it wasn't Stephen's testimony or Ananias's message or Barnabas's welcome that turned Saul's life around. It was his encounter with the living Lord Jesus. There will nearly always be good influences and it's a reminder to those of us who are Christians of the power of our witness, both by our words and our lives, but the central priority in winning people is to bring them to the Lord Jesus.

That's what happened to the converts in Philippi. Both the jailer and Lydia the business woman were brought face to face with Jesus. If you're not a Christian but you feel that something is drawing you irresistibly to consider the Christian faith then this is where you must begin: not with the church, not with a determination to turn your life around, but an honest encounter with Jesus.

2. Faith in the Lord Jesus

The second factor in conversion is faith. Do you remember what Paul said to the Philippian jailer? 'Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household.' Paul wasn't saying that his faith would automatically save everyone in his household. He was saying 'You've got to believe in the Lord Jesus and that goes for everyone in your household as well.'

There's only one way to salvation. It applies to you. It applies to your wife. It applies to your children. It applies to your wider family. It applies to your servants. You've got to put your faith in Jesus. There's no other way to be saved.

How did Lydia describe herself after she was baptised and wanted to give Paul Christian hospitality? She said, 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house.'

Believing in the Lord Jesus, of course, doesn't just mean accepting him as a historical figure. It means entrusting your life to him. On the last day of the Holiday Bible Club

Keith illustrated this to the children. He got a group of them to lift him up as high as they could off the ground. It was a risky thing to do. He's no lightweight. They might have thought it would be fun to drop him from a great height. They might have got sore arms and dropped him anyway. But he trusted them to be sensible and to be strong. I don't think I was the only one who was nervous about the whole thing. But Keith showed his trust in them and he proved it by putting himself and his safety in their hands. Of course they couldn't hold him up for long but at least they managed to get him down fairly safely.

Who can you trust in this world? Who is strong enough to be dependable at all times? There's only one, and that's Jesus. Christian conversion is putting your trust completely in him: to forgive your sins, to put you right with a holy God, to secure your future in heaven after death, to hold you up through all the experiences of life before death.

What are you putting your trust in?

3. Obedience to Jesus as Lord

A feature of Acts chapter 9 is the number of times Jesus is referred to as Lord. It comes 14 times. I like to mark my Bible and I've highlighted these references. They shine out of the page. Jesus is Lord.

In verse 1 the scene is set with these words. 'Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.' When Jesus challenged him Saul replied, 'Who are you, Lord?' His question already contained the answer.

The little section from verse 10 to verse 19 where Ananias is told to go and speak to Saul is a hot spot of references to the Lord. 'The Lord called to him ... "Yes, Lord," he answered ... the Lord told him ... "Lord," Ananias answered ... the Lord said to Ananias.' And finally, when Ananias goes and speaks to Saul in verse 17 this is what he says.

'Brother Saul, the Lord has sent me —Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here —so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' It's not quite as clear as that in the NIV but that's what Ananias said: 'The Lord has sent me.'

When the Philippian jailer asked, 'What must I do to be saved?' did Paul answer, 'Believe in Jesus and you will be saved'? No, he didn't. He said, 'Believe in *the Lord* Jesus and you will be saved.'

When Lydia responded to Paul's message we read that it was because 'the Lord opened her heart to respond'. When she proclaimed her faith she said, 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord'.

When Jesus comes into your life he doesn't come in as slave but as master; he doesn't come in as spectator but as director; he doesn't come in as passenger but as driver. He's in charge. He's the boss. He is Lord.

JESUS IS LORD! Creation's voice proclaims it,
For by His power each tree and flower was planned and made.
Jesus is Lord! The universe declares it,
Sun, moon and stars in heaven cry, 'Jesus is Lord!'

Jesus is Lord! Jesus is Lord! Praise Him with hallelujahs for Jesus is Lord.

Praise him with hallelujahs. Yes, but it must go beyond that. It's possible to praise him with hallelujahs and yet be living a double life. Making Jesus Lord of your life is more than just praising him with hallelujahs. It's praising him with holiness, praising him with integrity, praising him in purity. It's praising him by getting rid of all hypocrisy. Conversion means trusting Jesus and making him Lord of your life.