

1 John 4:19

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: 30 September 2007

Preacher: Robert Macleod

[0 : 00] For those of you who like a text around which sermons are built, it may well be appropriate to suggest our text for this morning as found in 1 John 4, verse 19.

And we're very succinctly, we're told, we love him because he first loved us.

We love him because he first loved us. Now, three years or so back, I was given a book, which in a sense is a bit of an autobiography by John Stott.

The book was entitled, Why I'm a Christian. And in that book, as I read it, I was challenged and reminded of it again this week.

He challenged because John Stott shared in that book the various processes, influences that were born in on him that ultimately brought him to Christ.

[1 : 25] He considers in that book, against all the back cloths that you and I are confronted with of many religions and many influences, brought to square up to these and to consider against them, what is it in the Christian faith that draws us ultimately to the Savior Jesus Christ.

And whenever we think about that, what it is that brings us to the place in our lives where unashamedly we become followers of Jesus, we would expect certain, you would say, phrases or influences to be common to all of us.

And in a sense, they are. We would expect John Stott to say, as perhaps many of us would, maybe not all of us, but at least many of us would say that in our backgrounds there's the influence of a Christian home, the influence of a Christian parent or parents, the strong influence of a Christian community.

And if we go further back, we might say even the influence of a Christian country. It may be that we've been privileged to also find our education within the context of a school that is overtly a Christian.

And so, what has brought us to Christ has been a mix of all these things. Where we're born, the direct influences upon our lives through parents and peers.

[3 : 19] And all of these are true. You can't say they're not true. And if we were having a time of open testimony, perhaps some of us today are Christians directly because of these influences.

But ultimately, that's not the total picture. We would also expect in any given testimony to have a statement, something along the lines, well, on such and such a date, in such a year, at such a place.

Everything came to a head in my life. And I submitted and I bowed to the Lord Jesus Christ and I became a Christian.

In the experience of John Stott, it was on the 13th of February 1938, as a boy of 17. And he, in his own testimony saves, made a decision for Jesus, listening to a man preach on Pilate's question, what shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?

And until then, John Stott would admit that he had been taught, he had thought about the things of God, but that particular day, that question, coupled to the words, Behold, I stand at the door and knock.

[4 : 49] If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me. And so, in John Stott's experience, he traces it back not just to influence, but he traces it back to a specific day and year in his life.

And I'm sure you too, perhaps, can do that. But that's, again, only part of the story. I think the most significant factor, and that's what I want us to think about this morning and the time that we've got, is that ultimately all of us who profess to be Christians this morning have become followers of Christ.

Not because of influence, primarily. Not because of the education of parents, the example of parents, a Sunday school teacher's instruction and so on.

Not the communities we've grown up in, not even the decisions that we've made at such and such a time, in such and such a place, on such and such a year. Ultimate, the ultimate factor, is much more profound than that.

And that is, that it lies not with us, but with God himself. And, perhaps, by way of introduction to this, this morning, we can picture it more dramatically.

[6 : 21] When we think of the way one of old described that process. A long time ago, there was a man called Francis Thompson. And he coined the expression, the hound of heaven.

That phrase was further elaborated upon, or expounded, by a man called R. Moffat Gowtry in his book, This Tremendous Lover.

Francis had spent his childhood in a very sad environment. He was a lonely boy. And in many respects, his childhood was loveless.

And as he grew up into adolescence, and into adulthood, everything he put his hand to, failed. Or it seemed, appeared to fail for him. He failed successively to become a Roman Catholic priest, a doctor, and even like his father, a soldier.

Francis Thompson ended up on the streets of London. And on the streets of London became a lost individual. Until a Christian couple happened upon him.

[7 : 41] And as they got to know him, and as they interacted with him, realized his genius as a poet. And in many respects, that Christian couple was the beginning of the road back to dignity and normality for Francis Thompson.

But years later, as he described the process that ultimately led to himself becoming a follower of Jesus, he expressed it in a poem that reads this, Fled him down the nights and down the days, he wrote.

I fled him down the arches of the years. I fled him down the labyrinth ways of my own mind and in the midst of tears. I hid from him and under running laughter upstayed hopes I sped and shot precipitated the downed titanic glooms and chasm fears.

From those strong feet that followed me, followed after, but with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instancy, they beat and a voice beat.

More instant than the feet. All things betray thee. Who betrayest me? And when Gowtry was analysing and looking at the poetry of Francis Thompson, Gowtry was a degree offended at the thought that Francis would liken God to a hound that seemed to hunt him and chase him throughout his day.

[9 : 33] But as Gowtry reflected upon that imagery or allegory of Thompson, he came to see directly as a consequence of looking at Psalm 23 that in life it was, and in experience, it was a very fitting, a fitting allegory.

Because he came to see in Psalm 23, for example, that the Hebrew word for follow was anything but a mild verb.

It was a very forceful verb. And as he thought about the collie dogs of Scottish crafts and hills and crags, he began to see that there was good as well as bad in all of these things.

And so he came to see that that forceful verb could well be rendered, goodness and mercy, have hunted me, haunted me, dogged my steps all the days of my life.

And so he could picture this legitimate pursuit that was going on in Francis' mind. And I think that's why also there is legitimacy in it because Jesus himself took the same metaphor.

[10 : 53] And we read it this morning in Luke 15. Jesus told them this parable. Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?

And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders, goes home, calls his friends and neighbors together and says, Rejoice with me. I have found my lost sheep.

I tell you, in the same way, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not repent.

And so, just as in the experience of Francis Thompson, so in your experience and mine, the ultimate wonder of our faith is not that we have decided to follow Jesus.

It is ultimately that this hound of heaven, this tremendous lover, has not given up, but has persistently, doggedly pursued us all the days of our lives to that moment we humble ourselves before Him.

[12 : 11] And that is why perhaps the greatest commentary of all on this attempt by Francis Thompson to Thomas to express himself are the words in 1 John 4.19.

we love Him. Why? Because He first loved us. And I think this is best illustrated for us in the experience of Saul of Tarsus.

And that is what I want us to turn now to reflect a little. Because in Acts we are reminded of the process that led to Saul of Tarsus' conversion.

In Acts 26 and verse 14 Paul says, I heard a voice saying, Why do you persecute me?

It is hard to kick against the pricks or against the goads. Saul's conversion is a conversion that is celebrated in the Christian church.

[13 : 23] And rightly so. But very often it is a conversion that can cause concern for many genuine Christian people. Because they struggle to understand whether they're Christians or not.

For the simple reason they hold their hands up and say, Well, we don't have such a dramatic experience to speak of. We don't have a Damascus road experience like Saul of Tarsus.

And that is, my friends, if it's part of your difficulty with assurance is a wrong way to look at Saul's conversion. A conversion. Okay, there was a moment in Saul's experience where it was dramatic.

It was a moment of turning, yes. But in Saul of Tarsus' experience, just like Francis Thomas, just like many people, all of us in fact, there is this process that leads to a decision.

And that's what I want us to think about. To think where in Acts and in the record of Luke, we see this process going on in Saul's life.

[14 : 41] The Greek word that is used for prick or for god is one that can be translated spur or whip or god.

And in classical Greek it was used very often in a metaphorical sense. In Proverbs 26.3, for example, we read a whip for the horse, a halter for the donkey, and a rod for the backs of fools.

And in the context of Saul of Tarsus' experience, there's a sense in which we can see Jesus himself, either as a farmer who is goading a reluctant, a bullock or horse, or a trainer, as it were, a horse who is rumbustious and disobedient.

But the implications in Saul's experience is that Jesus was pursuing him, was prodding him, was pricking him, and all the time Saul thought he was doing a noble thing by resisting these prods and these pricks, these goads of the master.

But all the while they were working in his life. And the question is, what were they? What were these goads? And I think there's four that we can highlight.

[16 : 05] There's first of all, the goad, the fact that he was goaded by his mind. Saul, as we all know, was a highly educated individual.

He was educated in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, one of the most celebrated Jewish teachers of the first century. Theologically, Saul was, you would say, a thoroughbred in Judaistic thinking, philosophy, outlook.

and concerning Jewish law, he was zealot. There's a sentence in which almost daily you can imagine or picture Saul giving himself to this educational process.

And as he gives himself to this process of education, becoming so convinced by it that it seems utterly impossible for a Jew to come to the place where they will reject the traditions and the ways and the thinking of their fathers and follow Jesus.

In his mind, it is something inconceivable that a good Jew would look at a man crucified between two thieves and believe that he was the Messiah.

[17 : 29] And yet, that is exactly what happened as part of the goading process that went on in Saul's life. To Saul, anyone who was put to death or hung on a tree was under God's curse.

And yet, despite all the education, all the input of these teachers of the law, there was a process going on in the mind of Saul of Tarsus.

Subconsciously, there were doubts. The doubts began to rise or arise within his mind and within his thinking.

As the rumors of Jesus of Nazareth circulated, it was impossible for him, as a Jew in the culture and in the community that he moved in, not to either hear off or discuss the life and the words and the ways and works of the Nazarene.

And as these rumors circulated, all the teaching of Paul of Saul's life couldn't hold back the influences of these rumors and what they impacted him with.

[19 : 01] The other night I was having to give an overview of Luke's gospel in Bonesse Baptist Church. And it struck me that in the context of Luke and the desire of Luke in his gospel to present Theophilus with this full, thorough account of his gospel.

So much so that this orderly account would bring Theophilus, who I believe was a real person, to certainty of the things in which he was instructed.

Luke could not escape the fact that the baby who was born so uniquely in Bethlehem was indeed the Son of Man who had come into the world to seek and to save sinners.

And the whole of this orderly account that Luke sends to Theophilus and is expanded upon in the Acts of the Apostles is with this purpose to not only educate the mind in the things of God, in the ways of Jesus, but to convince us of Him as well.

To convince us that the Nazarene, as far as religion was concerned, religion was not to be a barrier to faith. Race was no barrier to the amazing grace of God.

[20 : 40] Rank in society was no barrier to the amazing grace of God. Nor was even the ruin of a man's life or a person's life. A barrier to the amazing grace of God that had manifested itself in Jesus and come to seek what was lost.

And Saul in Jerusalem is confronted in his intellect with all of these truths. Maybe he had heard Luke speak.

Maybe he had himself listened as well as read some of these stories that were in circulation. But he couldn't escape the beauty of the Nazarene.

It was inescapable the authority with which Jesus spoke. He couldn't escape the compassion that Jesus manifested in his life and in his work and in his service.

The gentleness of the man and the mighty dramatic works of healing. And even then he couldn't escape the rumors that circulated after his death.

[21 : 57] True, at one level he could not understand how someone crucified could be Messiah. But he couldn't escape the fact that multitudes of people spoke about this man crucified as no longer dead but alive.

And that troubled his mind. The one who was dead had been spoken to. The one who was dead exclaimed rose and revealed himself.

His mind must have been in turmoil. I was struck the other day by the words of John in his first epistle.

Written towards the end of his life. But John said this, that which was from the beginning which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled concerning the word of life.

The life was manifested and we have seen and bear witness. And declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us.

[23 : 12] That which we have seen and heard, we declare to you that you also may have fellowship with us and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

Christ. And I sometimes wonder if Saul at this stage has been privy to some of these sessions of ministry.

He certainly has heard the rumors or through the rumors statements as John has just made towards the end of his life, which I'm sure was recited by John in many of the sermons that John preached.

And so Saul's mind was in turmoil. But he was also goaded by his memory. And his memory must have looked back upon many things, even at this stage in his life.

But not least, it must have looked back to what we're told in Acts 6 concerning Stephen. In Acts 6.5 we're told of Stephen that he was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

[24 : 29] And Saul must have seen with his own eyes the transparency of Stephen's life and of Stephen's Christian conviction.

Because if you go to Acts 7 when Stephen is giving a response to the accusations that are against him.

We're told in verse 55 he being full of the Holy Spirit gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God and said look I see the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

Saul saw that. He saw it. He heard the response of Stephen. He hears the reaction of those that will accuse him and he himself consented to his death as we're told in 8 verse 1.

And I'm sure as Saul is trying to collate all the pieces of information that's going on in his head as he's trying to make sense of all the things that are said concerning Jesus.

[25 : 49] And as he is resisting his memory as well as his mind kicks in and he thinks of the demeanor of Stephen the Christian. He thinks of the defense of Stephen the Christian.

He thinks of the courage of Stephen the Christian. He in his mind thinks back to the dignity of the man who was led out and who is stoned as he submits to death in that kind of fashion.

And how many times because of his memory must he have thought what explains their conviction? What explains their courage? But thirdly he was also goaded by his conscience.

Goaded by his mind, goaded by his memory. Goaded by his conscience. He was an extremely righteous man in his own eyes. And according to the law, he could rightly say, unblemished.

Touching the law, he says to the Philippians, blameless. Yet this blameless righteousness, we might call Paul's claim, was a blameless righteousness that was an external conformity to the requirements of the law.

[27 : 15] Outwardly, yes, he obeyed the precepts and the prohibitions of the law, but inwardly, his conscience knew otherwise. Inwardly, he knew he was a sinful man.

C.S. Lewis captures this beautifully, I think. You know, most of us will try time after time to put a good face on who we are and what we are.

And perhaps most of us will remember as God's spirit began its work in our lives, how we try to make ourselves look good to God. We're not really bad people.

And if I had a pound for every time I've heard that over the last 25 years, I would be a wealthy man. C.S. Lewis put it this way, for the first time, or the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose.

What was it he found? I found, he says, what appalled me. A zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds.

[28 : 24] My name, he said, was Legion. And it was exactly the same for Saul. For Saul, it was the last commandment that ultimately hurt his conscience most, or convicted him most.

He could manage the first nine, but when it came to the ninth and it came to covetousness, he was undone. The first nine had to do with words, they had to do with deeds.

But the ninth commandment, the last one, was something that had neither to do with deed nor word, but it had to do with desire. And that's why when writing to the Romans, he put it this way, what shall we say?

Is the law sin? Certainly not. Indeed, he says, I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, do not covet.

But sin, seeing the opportunity afforded by the commandment produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from the law, sin is dead.

[29 : 35] once I was alive apart from law, but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life, and I died. And finally, he was goaded by the Spirit of God.

That which makes, or goaded in his Spirit by the Spirit of God. That which makes Saul of Tarsus unique as an individual. As a Jew, he believed God.

As a Jew, he sought humbly to follow what he thought was the ways of God and what God would desire of his life. He sought to serve God with a clear conscience, but there came a moment in his life where he knew, he knew through the very law that he sought to obey, that he was a sinner, and that he was dead, and that he was, as he puts to the Ephesians, dead in trespasses and sins.

He was estranged from the God he thought he was united to. And so all of these goads, we might say, were part of the process that led Saul of Tarsus to that place where he humbled himself before his God.

Time is gone. Can I ask you in church this morning, is that not a similar process to how it has been with you? Nothing ultimately to do with background, with influence, with education, with parents, with churches we belong to.

[31 : 15] Nothing to do with any of these things. Nothing even ultimately to do with when we decided to follow Jesus. It has to do with this tremendous love of God that would not let you nor me go.

That kept on, as it were, searching, kept on probing, kept on prodding us in our minds and in our consciences, in our memories, like Saul of Tarsus, in our spirits.

Knowing, bringing us ultimately to the place where we know or knew that as sinners there was only one hope, one answer, that answer, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Is that how it's been for you? Can I ask you this morning if you're in church and you still have to come to the place where you humble yourself before God?

Still to come to the place where hearing the invitation as you've heard it so many times in your lives, come unto me. You have still to come. Can I say to you, just be still a moment.

[32 : 41] Think back. Think back to all the ways that God has spoken to you. all the gods that He has put in place in your life down through the years.

The intellectual ones. The memories. Conscience.

Listen to your conscience. Conscience. Conscience. Conscience. Conscience. And learn that these intellectual disturbances that are yours with regards to the things of God, these memories that are yours with respect to the things of God, that conscience that is troubled because of the things of God, are as a consequence of this tremendous lover who first loved you, that he gave his only beloved son to you.

to bear in his own body on the tree of Calvary, not the person sitting next to you's sins, but your sins.

That is love, my friends. And greater love has no man than this, Jesus said, that one was prepared to lay down his life.

[34 : 10] That's what Jesus did for you. Could he do more? no. Will you humble yourself to him today? I hope so.

Let us pray. Our gracious God and loving heavenly Father, perhaps for many of us today in church, we have used the life of Saul as a reason why we're not professing Christians.

because we've always imagined that our turning to Christ, our conversion had to be dramatic. But the reality is that even the most dramatic conversions recorded have in the background the pursuit of God of the soul, the searching and the prodding of God in one's life.

Doubtless in church this morning there's not one of us who has not got these influences in our background. May your spirit work in all of us today.

And particularly if we remain estranged to you and strangers to your grace and love. may your spirit so work in us to bring us to the Lord Jesus Christ that we may make him our savior and our Lord, our hope for time and for eternity.

[35 : 52] Amen.