

# Acts 9:1-18

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[ 0 : 00 ] Before we turn to God's Word, let's bow for a few moments of quiet reflection and prayer. Amen.

What we know not, teach us. What we have not, give us. What we are not, make us.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Amen. I invite you to turn in God's Word to that same passage in Acts chapter 9.

Acts 9, we'll read again at verse 3. As Saul 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?

[ 1 : 12 ] 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.

Our subject this morning is a man whose life was changed. And the change that took place in the life of that man on that day, the man known then as Saul of Tarsus, has had a lasting impact on the history of our world.

And indeed, we could delve very profitably into that impact as we look through the centuries. But today, it's not a history lesson.

Today, the reason that we're looking at the change that took place in this man's life is because it's all about God and you.

God and me. God and me. Here's a man who needed to be changed. Here's a man who was changed.

[ 2 : 36 ] And you and I, in the sight of God, whatever our different experiences may have been, we're here today. We need to be changed.

We can be changed. But of course, when we say that to people in general, if I say to somebody, whoever it might be, someone who's not a Christian, and I say, you need to change.

You need to be changed. You get a great variety of reactions. Obviously, a very common reaction is, me? Need to change?

But I'm doing fine. I'm getting on well. Getting on well in my family. Getting on well in my job. I'm getting promotion. I'm happy. We've got good holidays.

We've got good home. I don't need to be changed. And if this judgment that you talk about or your holy book talks about, if that does ever come, then no problem.

[ 3 : 44 ] My track record is good enough to get through any judgment if there is one. Or perhaps another reaction, and perhaps you've had experience of it, speaking to folks.

Someone who would say to you, no, no, no. I've tried that. I tried that kind of change you're talking about, but it doesn't work.

I went to your meetings. I put up my hand when they asked people to accept Jesus. I went to the front. I've tried it loads of times.

And it just doesn't work. It's a lot of emotional claptrap. So don't talk to me about needing to be changed. But then you might have another kind of reaction where the person would say, sounds the same, but there's a very subtle difference.

Well, I want to change. I know my life's a mess. I want to change. And when I say that, I have in mind, among other people, a man who I was asked to go along and speak to at a free lunch that we have.

[ 5 : 04 ] In our church in Edinburgh, a free light lunch at Leith Free Church. And we do get a lot of people in great need. And this particular man, I was called over by one of our team to speak with him.

And he said, look, Peter here says that he'll never change. He was an alcoholic. And he knew it. And he had tried to stop.

And he knew people. And he pointed to one or two in the room there and said, look, they've become Christians through the ministry of Bethany Christian Center.

They've become Christians. It's worked for them. And I've tried it, but it hasn't worked for me. I would like it to work. But I always fall back. Ask Jesus to help me.

And it doesn't work, I'm afraid. It works for others, but not for me. And then, of course, there are those, and I'm sure that for many of us here, it's true.

[ 6 : 10 ] We thank God that we have been changed, that we were shown how to come to Calvary as sinners and to put our trust in Jesus and receive new life through him.

That's what I was speaking to the children about. God in the business of healing messed up lives. And we thank God for that.

But we do have to admit that we're not what we ought to be. We're not what we once were, thank God. But we're not what we should be. And so there comes the experience of this man, Saul of Tarsus, a man whose life was changed.

And so, whatever your situation, whether you fit into any of the categories that I mentioned, or maybe into some category that I haven't mentioned or I've never even thought of, whichever category you may be in today, there is one thing that is absolutely certain, and it is this, that this man, Saul of Tarsus, he was changed dramatically and permanently at the end of his life.

he was able to say, I know whom I have believed, and I'm persuaded that he's able to keep what I've committed to him against that day.

[ 7 : 45 ] It wasn't emotionalism. It was a true, lasting change. And it is certain also that the God who changed that man is still able, being God, to change lives today.

I want us to look, first of all, at the lead-up to the change. Certainly, from one point of view, it happened out of the blue.

Saul didn't expect it, his companions didn't expect it, the Christian church didn't expect it, but was there anything leading up to the change in this man's life?

I'd like to use two words to describe part, at least, of what led up to it. And the first is this, it was discordant.

Discordant. What do I mean by that? What I mean is that there's no evidence of this man gradually, over several months perhaps, as he saw that his methodology wasn't working, that persecution wasn't eliminating every Christian, others were springing up where he least expected it himself, and it wasn't that he began gradually to ease off the antagonism.

[ 9 : 15 ] No, not a bit of it. He was, as it's so dramatically put in the older version, he was breathing out threatenings and slaughters against the church, against the disciples of the Lord.

He was, as he says elsewhere, exceedingly furious against them. And you see that in this chapter and when he himself gives his personal testimony later on, there in verse 13, and Ananias says, Lord, think of all the harm this man has been doing to your saints.

He's got authority to arrest everyone who calls on your name. And you can be quite sure that that morning when he and his companions had woken up and had their breakfast in the inn or the tavern where they stayed, it would have taken them several days to get from Jerusalem to Damascus, that there they would be around the breakfast table, and he would be planning his campaign of extermination against the believers, ensuring that this one wouldn't escape or that one that the gates would be guarded and so on.

He was, to the very moment, to that very moment, raging against Christians and the Christian church. And yet, just a little while later, an hour or two later, he was a changed man.

One of the prophets hundreds of years before had said, can the Ethiopian change his skin? And the answer expected was no.

[ 10 : 57 ] Can the leopard change his spots? Well, no. And yet here, the answer has turned on its head. Can he?

Yes, he can. It happened. But it was a discordant lead up to it. Sound and fury against the disciples of the Lord.

But I describe it also as insistent, the lead up to the change. Now, of course, we know that Saul of Tarsus knew his Bible and he knew the truth, though he didn't believe it.

So, undoubtedly, that would have had its part to play. But I'm thinking particularly of a word that is used, or a phrase that is used by the Lord Jesus himself.

What he says, Saul, Saul, it is hard for you to kick against, our version here uses the word goads, or perhaps more colorful, the old version, it is hard for you to kick against the pricks, the cattle driver trying to get the recalcitrant ox to pull the plow.

[ 12 : 13 ] And so, there's this little prick, this little goad, and he sticks it in the ox to get him moving. Now, I agree with most of the commentators that the reference here is to the goads, the pricks, in Saul's conscience.

He has, he's known the word, and God perhaps, who knows, maybe speaking to him through the word, but also, as he sees the way that Christians die.

And especially because he refers to it later on in chapter 22, where he gives his own account of things, he says, I was there when your martyr Stephen was put to death, and I approved his death.

And here, something surely, as he saw that man's face like the face of an angel, as he heard him say that he saw heaven open, and the Son of God, the Son of Man, Jesus, standing at the right hand of God.

No doubt Saul at that moment would have exploded with anger hearing such words. But there were goads, there were pricks, and God, the divine cattle driver, if I can put it like that, is behind him and pricking his conscience.

[ 13 : 41 ] Some of you will be familiar with a well-known poem in the English language, The Hound of Heaven. And the author, Francis Thompson, came from a comfortable rural home, but he didn't like it, he wanted a bit more excitement, and he ended up in London and became what we would nowadays call a rough sleeper.

And the Christianity that he had heard in his childhood, he wanted to escape from it, from its restrictions, from its narrowness, but he found he couldn't.

And he wrote sometime later this poem where he describes God insistently drawing towards him and pricking him with the goads, not as a divine cattle driver, but as a divine hound of heaven.

And among other things, this is what he says, I fled him down the nights and down the days.

I fled him down the arches of the years. From these strong feet that followed, followed after, but with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instancy, they beat, and a voice beat, more instant than the feet.

[ 15 : 17 ] All things betray thee who betrayest me. Halts by me that footfall, that footfall, is my gloom after all, shade of his hand, outstretched caressingly.

Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest, I am he whom thou seekest. Thou dravest love from thee who dravest me.

Isn't that what the Bible teaches us again and again and again? The metaphors change. The imagery changes. At one time, we're told it's a seed, the seed of God's Word.

And through sermons, through teaching as a child, through perhaps snatches of a psalm sung, or a chorus learned, or a text that has been, or a story that's been told in Sunday school, whatever it might be, it's God's seed.

And it's a way down there, and nobody can see it, as they couldn't see any change in Saul of Tarsus taking place. And it's there for years and years and years. And then in God's time, in God's time, it comes, it germinates, it brings fruit.

[ 16 : 36 ] Or it's like a hammer. We're told a hammer that insistently the blows come, and they don't seem to be making any difference. The iron is too hard, but there's an effect.

And year after year, after year, after year, the hammer blows of God's Word, perhaps forgotten, perhaps pushed away, and then at God's time, God's moment, suddenly the last blow is the one that brings the iron to break, and things change.

People like Francis Thompson, like Saul of Tarsus, they want to get away from this one who follows them, insistently speaking to their souls and their consciences.

But they can't. They can't. And conviction comes, and desire to trust in the Jesus they've rejected, a man whose life was changed.

Are you in that lead-up to the great change that by God's grace could take place even today?

[ 17 : 48 ] Let's look at the timing of the change. When did this happen to that man, Saul of Tarsus? A couple of things here.

Firstly, when it was least expected. When it was least expected. The Christians of those early days, they'd seen many remarkable things.

Some of them, either personally, or it had been told them firsthand, they'd seen the leader of the execution squad, the Roman centurion, a hard-bitten man, no doubt, because of his job.

And yet, what words did he speak as he saw how Jesus died? Certainly this man was the Son of God. And another gospel writer tells us that others with him said the same thing.

They'd seen great miracles. And there, on the day of Pentecost, the extraordinary things that happened. They saw 3,000 people, and that was only the men. There were women and children who believed as well.

[ 18 : 53 ] 3,000 and more coming to faith in Jesus Christ in a day. They'd seen remarkable things. They'd seen, many priests were told, becoming obedient to the faith.

And the priests, many of them, who had been so bitter against Jesus, denying that he could ever be the Messiah. And they were changed. And then, they saw how people far away, people in far off Ethiopia, people in far off Damascus, where Paul is going in Syria, they were changed.

And they knew that not only Jews, but Gentiles, people were being brought into the kingdom of God. And as they thought about these things, and no doubt they gave God thanks for it, and they were praising him for it, but in their hearts they were saying, ha, ha, ha, but not that man, not Saul.

Could never happen to him. Look at him. He's like the, what they say in the Psalms, a raging bull of Bashan. He'll never be changed. But he was, he was, when least expected.

And friends, you and I know very well, many of us thank God in personal experience. We know that that's how God works sometimes.

[ 20 : 13 ] We know it happens in revivals when God visits the church in special ways, in individual lives, and it emphasizes, doesn't it, the sovereignty of God in salvation.

And it's a great encouragement, isn't it, to Christian people, to us in the church here, that God is still the God who is able.

God is still the God who can do as he wishes sovereignly when and how. So this change, it took place when it was least expected, but it also took place when it was most needed, when it was most needed.

Because, remember the situation, thousands and thousands of people are being converted. Now, those who were Jews, they had a good background in the Scriptures. But, before long, they're going to be outnumbered by non-Jews, by Gentiles, and they hadn't a clue about the Bible.

They hadn't a clue about what was done by God to prepare for the coming of Jesus, the Savior. And they needed to be taught. There would very soon, and we know it, the Bible tells us, there would be people with false ideas, false teachers, heretics, who would try to put an end to this great new movement of God's grace.

[ 21 : 36 ] And there needed, the church needed, teachers who could teach them well. And God chose, as the leader of all the teachers, a man of great knowledge and great wisdom, a man of great teaching skill and ability, a man who had doctrinal understanding.

He didn't know it himself yet, and the church didn't know it, but then God knew it, and He said, I'm going to send them to the Gentiles and to kings and to the people of Israel so that they might be taught the truth of God, of salvation in Jesus.

And also, as this new movement was taking shape and going out from here to there and to different countries far afield, there needed to be a vision, there needed to be a strategy, someone who could see how best to direct this infant church.

And there was Saul. Read the Acts of the Apostles, read his letters, and see what a strategist he was, what vision he had. Ah, through this man still raging against the church, God is working His purpose out as year succeeds to year, and this is our God, and He's still working in His own sovereign way.

So, there's the lead-up to the change, there's the timing of the change, but let's look at the heart of the change. What exactly happened on that great day on the road to Damascus?

[ 23 : 04 ] Damascus. In order to understand it fully, you need to do what we're not going to do now, we don't have time, but you need to read the three accounts of Saul's conversion.

Here in chapter 9, written by Luke, in chapter 22, Paul tells what happened to that mob, baying many of them for his blood in Jerusalem when he's just been arrested, and then again, Paul tells the story to the Roman governor Festus and to King Agrippa in chapter 26 of the book of Acts.

Take the three of them together, and you'll notice the details that are given in one, but not in the others, and vice versa, that these help to paint the full picture, the wonderful picture of what happened that day.

And I want to say two things here again. Firstly, Saul that day, he heard the sound and understood the voice.

He heard the sound and he understood the voice. In verse 7, here in chapter 9, we read that those who were traveling with Saul, they heard the sound.

[ 24 : 23 ] But then, if you go to chapter 22 at verse 9, you read about these same people that they heard the sound, but they did not understand the voice.

They did not understand the voice. And then, if you go on to chapter 26, you read that, yes, Saul heard the sound, but we're also told that he heard the voice of him who spoke. and a very fascinating detail. He spoke to him in Aramaic. Not in Hebrew, the language of the students and the theologians, which Paul knew well, Saul knew well.

Not in Greek, the language that was spoken all over the Roman Empire and that Saul of Tarsus knew well. Not in Latin, a language you would get to know even better when he became the captive of the Roman army and was sent to Rome.

Not in any of these languages, he knew them well, but in his own heart language that he'd heard at his mother's knee. The language of his deepest emotions, Aramaic, his native tongue.

[ 25 : 43 ] And Jesus speaks to him. And he hears not just a sound like the others did, not just an indistinguishable voice, but the voice of Jesus because he says, who are you?

And the voice says, I am Jesus. Conversion is the work of God. The sovereign work of God.

Jonah, in that desperate situation in the belly of the big fish, at the end of his prayer when he's just about to be vomited out onto dry land, he says, I know salvation is of the Lord.

No one else could do what he's doing. Salvation is of the Lord. And you this morning, you may have heard many sounds in church services.

You may have heard the sound of eloquent preachers. You may have heard the sound of beautiful liturgy, the sound of melodious singing, and all of these things play their part.

[ 27 : 02 ] But I ask you, have you heard the voice of Jesus? And if you have not, ask him, cry out to him, Lord, speak to me, so that I hear not just a sound, but your voice, your voice of grace.

It must be the voice of God. God. That's illustrated very well in an incident in the life of William Wilberforce, the member of parliament who led the campaign against slavery and who was a changed man, of course.

He'd been a man about town. He was very popular in the party circuit and so on. But he became, he was converted, and one of his closest friends was the prime minister, William Pitt, the younger.

And he longed to see William Pitt coming to faith in Christ. Pitt wasn't so keen. I suppose, like many another, he thought that Wilberforce had gone a bit mad.

He'd become, as I used to say in those days, a Methodist. But eventually, he agreed to go. And they went to hear one of the most outstanding preachers in the Anglican church in those days, Richard Cecil.

[ 28 : 33 ] And there they are sitting in the church, and Wilberforce is in raptures. Richard Cecil is preaching with passion and with clarity the Word of God, the way of salvation.

And Wilberforce says, that's great. my good friend William, the Prime Minister, this is going to really speak to him.

And we're told that on the way out, they were leaving the church, and he said to his friend, the Prime Minister, well, William, what did you think of that?

And the reply, I didn't understand a word of what that man was talking about. He was an intelligent man, but he hadn't heard the voice of Jesus.

Cry out for that for yourself. He heard the sound and understood the voice, but also he saw the light, and he saw the Savior.

[ 29 : 39 ] In chapter 22 at verse 9, we're told that his companions saw the light, but here in verse 7 of chapter 9, we're told that they didn't see anyone.

Whereas, when we take the three accounts, we read that Saul saw the light from heaven, and in that light he saw Jesus.

And he tells us himself later on, writing to the Corinthians, he says to them, have I not seen Jesus our Lord? He wasn't there when Jesus was on earth, but he saw on that day.

Now, conversion is God's sovereign work. It's his work of unstopping deaf ears and opening blind eyes.

So, the person can say what that man said in the Gospels, one thing I know, whereas I was blind, now I see. Or, as Paul later was to write to the Ephesians, I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened.

[ 30 : 52 ] And again, I ask you, if you've not seen Jesus, not in the way Paul saw in that dramatic way, that was a sovereign revelation of God, but see him with the eyes of your heart, the Jesus who died for sinners on the cross, the Jesus who rose again, the Jesus who was here according to his promise.

Let me, once again, go into the wells of English literature and refer you to the poem by John Masefield, The Everlasting Mercy.

Some of you know it. This man, Saul, a really bad rascal, a poacher among many other things, he was converted after a very worldly life.

And Masefield describes very eloquently just what it meant, what it felt to that man that day. Oh, glory of the lighted mind, how dead I've been, how dumb, how blind, the station broke to my new eyes, was babbling out of paradise.

The waters, rushing from the rain, were singing, Christ is risen again. Friends, we're talking about a man whose life was changed, and at the heart of it is this, that God is in the business of changing lives from then till now, from before then, till now and after us.

[ 32 : 38 ] Pray, pray, ask now in your own heart if this is not your own glorious knowledge. Pray that God would unstop your ears, open your eyes, that you too might by God's grace be changed from a sinner under condemnation to a sinner set free.

The last thing, very briefly, I'll just give you the three headings I have and comment very briefly. The last thing is the result of the change.

What happened afterwards? Firstly, there was confusion. Confusion, when God steps in, when God makes broken lives whole.

Yes, there's confusion too, because we live in this world of sin, and we're still sinners. And so you find Saul disorientated, he's blind, he doesn't know where to look or where to turn.

His companions, what on earth are they going to do? Their leader, he was cursing Jesus, he was telling what he was going to do to all the followers of Jesus, and now he's saying, Jesus my Lord.

[ 33 : 54 ] They were confused. Ananias was confused, go and put your hands on this man, because he's praying. Praying, Lord, praying? I've heard from many about this man.

He kills all your sins. Surely not, Lord, surely not. What confusion. You know, sometimes conversion comes very smoothly, especially for children, boys and girls who heard about Jesus in their homes, in Sunday school, and it's like a flower opening, and they're still very young when they come.

But for others, it's often turbulent, it's often confusing. Another poet wrote that the path of true love never did run straight. Well, the love of God in men and women's lives may sometimes be like that, especially if a person comes from the background of an alien culture, a different religion, and it's significant that Saul was sent to Arabia, for we don't know how long, to the quietness of the desert, that he too might be brought out of this confusion into the full glorious light of the gospel of God.

There was confusion, there was contrition. The significant thing that God says to Ananias is, don't worry Ananias, he is a changed man because he's praying, because he saw his sins as he'd never seen them before, and so he's coming in contrition and confession, he's got blood on his hands, he's less than the least of all the saints, he knows it now, and so he comes and he prays.

There's confusion, there's contrition, and finally there's confession. We read that when he was baptized, sorry, when he was given his sight, he was baptized, and he began immediately to proclaim Christ.

[ 35 : 57 ] True, he needed time apart, but he's Christ's man now, and he can't keep it quiet. If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

And though I understand, some of you perhaps from personal experience in other lands, you understand that sometimes Christians, new Christians, find it difficult openly to profess their faith straight away.

It would mean prison or death. What about their families? Yet one way or another, the call is not to be silent with the faith that we have come to know.

this evening we sit at the Lord's table. Have you seen Jesus perhaps a long time ago or recently? Then the call is to join God's people in obedience, remembering Jesus, whom you love.

Amen. Now let's close.