The Conversion of Saul, a Pharisee
Acts 9:1-30

The book of Acts tells us how, in one generation, the Christian gospel spread, across the Roman world. And so far Luke has shown us how the church grew in Jerusalem, and then, with the conversion of the Samaritans and an Ethiopian eunuch, how the gospel leapt over barriers of ethnicity and race.

But next up, Luke is going to tell us about two key conversions that really served to launch the gospel out into the wider world. And the first one of those was the conversion of a Pharisee, called Saul, who becomes Paul, the apostle.

You see, if you want to see the world changed, as happened here in Acts, then hearts need to be changed, don't they? Our hearts need to be changed, to be converted. But to change the human heart, that's the hardest barrier of all. Harder even than race or ethnicity.

And the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch were outsiders, people on the margins. And so it would be easy for people like us to say, 'yeh, but I'm not like them'. But looking at today's passage, that's not going to be quite so easy to say, because with Paul we see the ultimate insider, someone who was educated, ambitious, and in the eyes of his peers, destined for great things, getting converted. So this passage has much to teach us.

Acts 9:1-31

The Problem with Religion
It's not an exaggeration to say that this is probably the most famous conversion account in the history of Christianity. Parts of this have even entered the wider English language: you'll hear someone say, 'she's had a Damascus road experience'; or, 'the scales have finally fallen from his eyes!'

But Luke starts this account with a flashback: v1, 'But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord…' Which reminds us that the Samaritans and an Ethiopian turning to Christ were really a pleasant interlude, between what is happening now, and what came before, which was the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. And at Stephen's execution Luke tells us that there was this man, Saul, standing, approving of his execution. And that execution opened the floodgates of persecution, as Luke says in 8:3, 'But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.'

And now, in chapter 9, Luke is telling us that Saul was still doing it. V1-2: 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 [which was an early name for the Christian faith], men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.'

So, the way Luke describes him, it's almost like Saul's an animal, hunting his prey, overcome with bloodlust. Later on in Acts, Paul will describe himself as being in a 'raging fury' (Acts 26:11). He wants to wipe this Christianity from the face of the earth.

Now why is that? Because this guy is educated, intelligent, and cultured. So what was going on in Saul's heart that would make him act like that?

Well, think about it. Paul was a Pharisee. In his own words elsewhere he says he was 'extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers' (Gal 1:14). So on the one hand, Saul is the ultimate conservative. He's a traditionalist, an insider, opposed to change, and he sees this new thing as a threat, and it must be eradicated.

And yet, there's much more than that, isn't there? You see as a Pharisee, Paul's whole life was built on a meticulous observance of the Old Testament Law. And later on he could claim that with regard to the Law he was faultless. He was perfect. He was sorted.

And there lies the problem with religion. Because if you think that your standing before God, your inner worth and value, is based on your moral achievement, and keeping the rules, and making the grade, and you think you *are* achieving, and making that grade, then it becomes the breeding ground, the culture-medium for pride in your life. And you can begin to look down on others who don't make the grade, as being less worthy than you. And then, in subtle and then not so subtle ways, you can begin to oppress them, because they are less deserving than you are. There is this sense of superiority and of power.

But if we're honest, it's not just Paul who thinks such thoughts, is it? Now, of course we don't go round breathing out murderous threats, but don't we all at times measure ourselves against others? And then the danger is that we feel good about ourselves, because we're better than this other person. And thinking that we're better than them, opens the door to putting them down, not physically, but at least with our words.

Now if you're not yet a Christian you might hear that and think, 'yes! And that's why we need to do away with religion!' Or if not do away with it, at least adopt the kind of pluralistic secularism we see in the West, that says that no-one has an exclusive claim on truth, that there is no *one* Way, so no-one can claim to be better than anyone else. But just think about it. Don't those solutions suffer just the same problem? After all, atheism looks down on those who *do* believe with a kind of morally-superior intellectual disdain, and pluralism ends with what someone else has called the *in*tolerance of tolerance. You see, pluralism says, There is no *one* Way, so everyone is right, and no one is better than anyone else, so we must be tolerant. And we will tolerate you, but only if you agree with us that this is the Way, the one pluralistic way, and not your Way. And if you don't, then we're going to call you prejudiced or, even worse, a bigot. Which is all deeply ironic, because all of a sudden their tolerance doesn't seem quite so tolerant after all.

Now, you might think of course, 'yes, but I'd never do that. I'm not into this doing people down, and thinking myself superior.' And yet, it's not just the world of religion that struggles with this, is it? Think about college or your workplace. You see, one other reason that Paul may have gone down the road he did was to further his own credentials. He says of himself elsewhere that 'I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age' (Gal 1:14). So career advancement

mattered to this guy. And maybe he started down this road to further advance his career as being zealous for the law, and to add an extra shine to his CV as the guy who led the charge against Christianity. And so just think about what goes on at work, or at college, and the urge we can feel sometimes to put others down to boost our own position, or to subtly undermine someone else's reputation to advance our own.

And so the problem with religion is not the preserve of religion. It's the problem of the human heart. That whether it's from a sense of our own inadequacy or from a sense of moral superiority, we put others down, we judge them, and we fail to love them as God calls us to.

So if moralistic religion and atheism and pluralism are not the answer, what is the solution to the problem of the human heart? What will change it? What can transform a man like Saul the Pharisee, or any of us lesser Pharisees?

The Answer of Grace

You see, the remarkable thing about Paul's conversion is that he was at his very worst. He was in full-flood in his violent, religious pride. But it's *then* that Jesus intervenes to save him. Verse 3, 'Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone 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."'

And that's the divine initiative of grace. You see, it's not Saul's religious zeal, or religious observance, or moral lifestyle that saves him in the end and turns him around. It's not that in some way Saul was able to look at his life and decide to do better and to live better and turn his zeal in a better direction. It's the fact that God, in his love and grace, took the initiative, when Saul was at his most underserving, and Jesus intervened to rescue him.

And that's what happens in conversion. You see, you can start out thinking that, it was my decision, that I decided to become a Christian; but what you discover is that all along it's been God chasing you, seeking you out, intervening in your life, taking the initiative, to bring you to the point of conversion. And he does it when, like Paul, we're undeserving, because he is gracious to those who don't deserve it, and because he loves us.

And it's this grace of God that pulls the rug out from under the feet of self-righteous religious pride, because he saves us by his grace and so we can never say, we can never boast, 'I did it'. Rather, he did it. It's the divine initiative of grace.

But the other thing you see here with Saul is the divine roadblock of grace.

I spent most of this week hobbling around with a bad ankle. And it took me probably double the time to walk anywhere, and I felt like an old man. And it wasn't helped by my girls, when we were out, running on ahead and cheering and applauding me down the street. But it was the being slowed down that frustrated me.

But if we dislike being slowed down, what about being brought to a full-stop in your life? We don't often see that as a sign of God's grace, do we? We don't think of him stopping us in our tracks, when we are in full-flow, as a mark of his love and grace to us. And yet in conversion, as well as at other times, that is exactly what God does, as in his grace, he confronts us with himself.

And Saul is left sprawled on the ground and dazzled, to the point of blindness, by Jesus. And it's this crunching encounter with Jesus, being brought to a full-stop, that forever changes Saul. Now, if you're not in a home group, all the groups have been studying Paul's letter to the Colossians. And when you realize the impact this encounter with Jesus on the road made on Paul, it's not hard to realize why Paul writes some of the things he writes in that letter to the Colossians: that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, that in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. How does Paul know that? Because he came face to face with him on this road to Damascus and the majesty of Christ literally, floored him.

But did you notice how Jesus identifies himself? This voice doesn't say, "I am the Son of God, whom you are persecuting?" It doesn't say, 'I am the One who sits at the right hand of the majesty on high, whom you are persecuting?" It says, 'I am Jesus.' And that must have been absolutely crushing for Saul. Because it was the followers of this very Jesus who Saul was trying to eradicate. It was their message that this Jesus had been raised from the dead, that Saul was trying to stamp out. It was this Jesus who Stephen said he could see standing at the right hand of God, as Saul approved of his murder. And now, Saul is thrown to the ground, and blinded by Jesus.

If there was any name Saul did not want to hear, that was it. It's interesting, isn't it, when God stops us in our tracks, and finally gets our attention, he will often tell us things we don't want to hear. And like Saul, when God confronts you with himself, he also confronts you with yourself, with what you are really like, and you discover that you're the one who's wrong.

But he doesn't do that to humiliate us, but because he loves us, because he wants to change us and transform us for our good. And as Jesus asks Saul, 'why do you persecute me?', it's as if he peels back the layers of our inner motives, and probes us deep on the inside: why are you doing what you're doing, why are you living the way you're living?

But though he's doing it for our good, these moments don't *feel* good. In fact they can feel like you've reached rock-bottom. You can feel broken and utterly defeated, as Saul must have felt lying in that road. And just picture the scene, this man, who expected to enter Damascus full of his own religious pride, ready to exercise his power over others, has to be led in by the hand, blinded and deeply humbled, like a captive in a Roman triumphal procession, defeated by the king.

Now, why does God do that? Why, at conversion or after, are there times when God brings us to rock-bottom? Well, I think the truth is that God must first bring us down, before he can lift us up. You see, if we are to understand the gospel of God's grace and be useful to God, we've got to first be brought to an end of

ourselves. You see, all the time we think we can bring something, that we can do it, that God needs us, we're still not there. But when like Paul we realize we are saved by Jesus' grace and that grace alone, then he can start to lift us back up, and make us useful to him.

And that's what starts to happen to Saul.

He lodges in Damascus on Straight Street, and Luke tells us in v9 that, 'for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.' Now what do you think was going through Saul's mind during those three days of darkness? Well, the Lord tells Ananias what: v11, 'he is praying.' It's not hard to imagine is it? Saul's mind is racing through all the Old Testament Scriptures, and he's thinking: 'this Jesus was crucified. He died the death of the cursed. But he's been raised from the dead, he's been glorified, I've just encountered him, which means he can't have been cursed for his own sin'. And then his mind would go to that passage in the prophet Isaiah, that speaks of the Servant of the Lord, 'he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed' (Is 53:5). And he must have been sat there in the darkness of his blindness, as the light slowly dawned on his heart, thinking, praying, 'O God I've been so blind, I thought I could see so clearly, but I was so blind. But now I see it, and you did it for me: when Jesus died, he died for me, he took my place.' And he would have been confessing, and asking for forgiveness and praying for the future.

And so when Ananias walks into the room after three days, Saul is fruit ready for the picking, and Ananias prays for him, the scales fall from his eyes, and he get's up and get's baptized, a new man. A man saved, not by religion or his own self-effort, but by the grace of God in Jesus. A grace that is available to all of us.

But if grace is the answer to religious pride, it also makes men brave.

The Courage of the Gospel

And very briefly I want us to see that Jesus' grace gives us courage for love, for forgiveness and for suffering.

Courage for Love

Just think about this man Ananias. The Lord appears to him in a vision, and tells him, v11, 'Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul.' And Ananias is thinking, 'God, what are you thinking?' Verse 13, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints." 'What are you thinking God? This man has wrecked marriages and families, there are wives without husbands, children without mothers because of this man, and he's come here to do the same, and you want me to go to him?' It would be suicidal, wouldn't it? But the Lord is insistent, v15, 'But the Lord said to him, 'Go…'

And in what must rank as one of the most beautiful scenes in the Bible, Ananias goes, and finds Saul, and lays his hands on him and says, "Brother Saul" (v17). My brother; welcome into the family. Now, what gave Ananias the courage to go, and to love like that when he could have chosen a very different path? It's the gospel

of Jesus' grace. Because when you know that Jesus has been gracious and loving to you when you didn't deserve it, then you will find the courage to love when others don't deserve it. And when you know that Jesus is in control, then it makes you brave, and courageous to do the hard but the right thing.

Courage for Forgiveness

Paul starts teaching about Jesus at Damascus, but eventually the tide turns against him and he has to flee to Jerusalem, back to the city where he had done so much harm, where Christians bore the scars of Saul's efforts to destroy them. And Luke tells us in v26 that 'he attempted to join the disciples.' But in their fear they all gave him the cold shoulder, v26, 'they were all afraid of him.' All except one man: v27, 'But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles.' So just when Paul needed a friend and needed forgiveness, Barnabas stepped up to the mark. Why? Because he knew the power of the gospel to redeem and transform.

And sometimes it takes courage to reach out, and to forgive the person who has hurt you. It's the courage of the gospel – that when you know the price Jesus paid for your forgiveness, you'll be prepared to pick up the cost of forgiveness for others. But it takes courage.

Courage for Suffering

When the Lord appears to Ananias he tells him that Saul is going to learn 'how much he must suffer for the sake of my name' (Acts 9:16). And it didn't take long for that lesson to start! He came to Damascus to arrest fugitive Christians, and he ends up having to flee as a fugitive Christian. He goes back to his Jewish community in Jerusalem and starts telling them about Jesus, and they turn on him as he had turned on others, and has to flee to his home town of Tarsus.

You see, as one commentator has said, 'Christ calls us to commitment, not comfort.' And the call to discipleship is the call to suffer – to take up your cross, to die to selfishness and pride, to pay the cost of loving others and forgiving others, and of telling others about Jesus. But when you understand the gospel, that we get to share in Christ's suffering – that when Saul persecuted the church Jesus could say 'Saul, it's me you're persecuting'; when we realize that whatever we go through for the sake of Jesus, for the sake of telling others about him, is just a small reflection of his sufferings for us, then we'll find the courage, as Paul found the courage, to be brave and to stand up, and to find our voice for Jesus.