

Acts 9:6

‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.... now get up and go in to the city, and you will be told what you must do.’

Here’s a quick exercise in navigation

- There are 360 degrees in a circle
- 0 degrees is in a sense straight ahead
- 90 degrees (a right angle) is a right turn
- 180 degrees is going in completely the wrong direction
- now here is the mistake that some people make
- they look at how other people are living
- and they conclude – see, I am living a better life than them, or I am not so bad as them
- and you can pretty much find people who you consider are worse than you
- but whether you are 1 degree off the correct course or 180 degrees off course
- when the journey is to eternity, you will still be infinitely off the right destination
- indeed, when you are off course, the longer you travel, the further off course you are

In Acts 9 we meet someone who is going in completely the wrong direction

- he is Saul of Tarsus and he is heading to Damascus to persecute the Christians
- the movement that we call ‘Christianity’ is so new
- that its people have not even been given the name ‘Christians’ yet
- they are called – ‘people who belonged to the Way’ (Acts 9:2)
- they believe the right Way to go is to trust Jesus and to follow him
- Saul believes that he should do everything he can to stamp the movement out
- He is a person where a 180 degree turn around will be required
- If he is to become a follower of Jesus and be saved in eternity
- This dramatic turn around is called his ‘conversion’

This is the first of three accounts of the conversion of Saul (Acts 9, 22 and 26)

- Which reflects Luke our writer’s view that it was extraordinarily important
- It is important because he will become a great preacher not only to Jews
- But to Gentiles, and take the Roman name Paul instead of his Hebrew name Saul

This first account of his call and the miraculous circumstances of his conversion

- Begins with his ‘still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples’
- In so doing he thinks of himself as a righteous man, he hates all men of ill repute
- He is committed to his idea of God and his law with zeal against those who break it
- He is particularly against those of ‘the Way’, ‘the sect of the Nazarenes’
- Who later at Syrian Antioch (Acts 11:26) will be called ‘Christians’ for the first time
- These believers ‘followers of the Way’ are probably so named
- Because they have a consciousness of walking in the true path of God’s salvation
- And moving forward to accomplish it’s purposes
- Saul left for Damascus to seek out people ‘who belonged to the Way’
- Because Damascus was an old city with a large Jewish community
- And if ‘the Way’ or ‘Christianity’ as we would say caught hold there
- It would affect tens of thousands of Jews in the city’s several synagogues

Saul of Tarsus has been part of the group of people that have killed Stephen

- Stephen has proclaimed that ‘the new come, therefore the old must go’
- But Saul is maintaining that ‘the old must stay, therefore the new must go’
- According to Saul the idea of a crucified Messiah was impossible
- The first recorded collision between Saul and the followers of Jesus
- Has resulted in the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Acts 8:1)
- After an interlude concerning the preaching of Philip and Peter
- Luke takes up the story, with Saul heading towards Damascus to continue his work

As he approached Damascus, Saul saw a light from heaven

- And heard a voice from heaven
- It seems as if the whole group travelling heard a sound
- But only Saul understood the words, word’s from God
- ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’
- Saul was undoubtedly thoroughly confused – he was not persecuting God
- How could he be rebuked for by God for doing the will and service of God
- Rather he would have been expecting praise for defending God and his laws
- It was an occasion reminiscent of the Shekinah glory of God in the Old Testament
- So glorious that Saul has fallen to the ground
- All he can do is to ask ‘Who are you Lord?’
- It is the answer to this question that presents him with the greatest challenge

I CHALLENGE

‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’

While Saul was hitting the church, Jesus had actually been feeling the pain

- A reminder that what is done to the least of his disciples is done to Jesus
- But the great challenge to him was that Jesus was alive
- His disciples had been right after all
- He had heard Stephen call on the Lord Jesus as he was dying
- But now he had heard Jesus calling him
- Saul had been spiritually blinded by wrong convictions
- But now a great light had caused him to be spiritually enlightened, though blinded
- He recognised the risen Lord

From his later references we can work out what Paul’s problem was

- His great problem in believing that Jesus was the promised Messiah
- Was his death upon the cross, to Saul that was an offence – a scandal
- No amount of logic or verbal gymnastics could alter the fact of Jesus’ death
- But now the revelation of the risen Lord has changed his whole perspective
- Because Jesus is alive, Saul has to conclude that his death was part of God’s plan
- That allows him to see that Jesus was the promised Saviour (Messiah) after all
- The dramatic change in Saul’s life can have no other explanation
- And through his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus he gains a new insight
- A new agenda for his life and foundations for his new beliefs
- Conversion requires: real repentance, true understanding and complete commitment
- Some people question whether it is necessary for everyone to have a ‘Damascus Rd’
- The truth is that not everyone does 180 degree turn but everyone has to change

II CHANGE

Now get up and go in to the city

Saul immediately had to realise that his previous life (religious, zealous, sincere as it was)

- Lay under God's rebuke, a voice from heaven had corrected him
- There was no more to be said – and Saul had to repent
- It does not matter whether you think your life needs a 1 degree or 180 degree change
- The truth is that it needs to change to avoid your being infinitely far away from God
- This does not mean that we need to set ourselves to a new course
- What it means is that we must fix our eyes upon a new destination – Jesus
- The Christian life is about trusting Jesus and obeying him
- Saul had been going to Damascus 'to arrest all those who called on the name' (v. 14)
- 'calling on the name' is a simple expression for prayer to God
- it is calling out in the prayer of repentance to Jesus that secures salvation
- one of the thieves crucified at the same time as Jesus called out to him
- 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom' – it was a prayer
- it was a saving prayer: 'Today you will be with me in paradise'

Saul has to revise his whole estimate of the life, teaching and death of Jesus of Nazareth

- for now he knew that he was alive and risen
- it was beyond any question that God had vindicated him
- he had to agree with the Christians that Jesus dying on the cross
- was really God's provisions for our sins
- and that Jesus' resurrection confirmed him as being both Lord and Christ

The main thing now was for Saul, until that point the church's sworn enemy

- to be integrated into the new community of believers
- God planned that this should be through the ministry of Ananias
- The place where Ananias and Saul were to meet was Straight Street
- Still a main through Damascus, now called Derb el-Mutaqim

In Damascus the blinded Saul follows the most intense type of fast

- Spending three days without eating or drinking (v. 9)
- People engaged in such fasts only if they were repenting or seeking God's face
- It seems that both were involved here

Visions occur often in Acts when God intervenes to direct the church into some new thing

- Through the conversion of Saul, God will be going a new work
- As the gospel goes to the Gentiles
- We should not miss the important part of the body of Christ in the conversion of Saul
- Others in the Christian body played an important part in his conversion and new life
- The faith and obedience shown by Ananias and Barnabas was significant
- They were both given a ministry of encouragement (much under-rated today)
- The first words Saul heard from a Christian after his conversion were, 'Brother Saul'
- Ananias' laying on of hands was a great way of love reaching out to a new believer
- Saul received the Holy Spirit and later was formally incorporated into the body
- Through his baptism (note the order)

It is sometimes implied that Saul's conversion is normative for Christian conversion

- But on closer examination that does not stand up
- Saul's conversion has some unusual features
- He was grasped by Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:12)
- It was a sudden turn around
- It is explicable only by a post-resurrection appearance of Christ
- But it also has some usual features
- It was the result of a divine initiative
- It is explicable only by a personal encounter and relationship with Jesus Christ
- It involved a change of direction

It is clear from the NT that not every believer came to faith by a Damascus Road experience

- Not everyone needs a dramatic conversion like Saul but everyone needs converting
- Conversion that starts with the work of God
- Conversion that comes through personal encounter and relationship with Jesus Christ
- Conversion that results in a change of direction
- Conversion that issues in real repentance, true understanding, complete commitment
- In shorthand, conversion affects the heart, the mind and the will

There are people who think they want to be Christians but want to follow their own way

- Repentance is the working of the grace of God, bringing our lives in line with Jesus

There are people who think that it does not matter what you believe if you are sincere

- But conversion brings us to a true understanding of Christ, his death and resurrection

There are people who think that Christianity is just another lifestyle choice (gym or stamps)

- But conversion brings us to complete commitment and surrender to the Lord Jesus

One of the great criticisms of modern day evangelism is that it calls for a decision

- I do not criticise it because it calls for a decision – a decision for Christ is good
- But it is not enough

Another great criticism of modern day evangelist is that it calls for commitment

- I do not criticise it because it calls for commitment – commitment for Christ is good
- But it is not enough

In the process of becoming a Christian, decision and commitment are certainly involved

- But it is surrender to the supreme authority and Lordship of Jesus that matters
- This is what it means, real repentance, true understanding, complete commitment

Saul came to understand that he had a mission to carry out for Christ

- His 180 degree turn around
- The revelation of the risen Lord Jesus Christ
- Which was a vital part in his becoming an apostle
- His consequent rethinking about the person of Jesus and his death
- Equipped Saul for the commission that he was about to receive
- 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting' was the challenge
- 'Now get up and go into the city' was the change (a journey in a new direction)
- that continued with a charge (in the sense of a responsibility)

III CHARGE

you will be told what you must do.'

Along with his conversion came a commission to witness

- once we accept his Lordship, we become his ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20)
- but in case we should be carried away at the prospect of this privilege
- we must remember that discipleship is often accompanied by suffering
- Saul might be the chosen instrument to carry Jesus' name to the Gentiles
- But Jesus says, 'I will show him how much he must suffer for my name' (v. 16)
- Jesus basic call to discipleship was the way of the cross
- Suffering for Christ must be counted to be a normal part of Christianity

Saul begins his new work by preaching in the Damascus synagogues

- The genuineness of his conversion is shown by his proclaiming
- Jesus is 'Son of God' (v. 20), Jesus is the Messiah/Christ (v. 22)
- His hearers were so astonished that they asked themselves if this were the same man
- Who had been persecuting Christians
- From Galatians (1:18) it appears that Saul continued that work for three years
- Before going to Jerusalem

There are some important lessons to learn from this about

- Evangelism, conversion, encouragement, testimony, preaching

The first thing we should learn is about evangelism

- There was never a more unlikely person to become a believer than Saul of Tarsus
- His opposition to the gospel was resolute
- His persecution of the Christians was zealous
- Therefore, we cannot pronounce anyone hopeless as far as conversion is concerned
- It is our duty to pray and work toward people who appear to be enemies of the gospel
- There is no greater witness to the transforming power of Christ than a 180 degree turn
- But any turn at all bears testimony to his saving grace and transforming power

Secondly, conversion means real repentance, true understanding, complete commitment

- It is not consistent to claim to be converted but not be living a life that is different
- It is not consistent to claim to be converted but not be learning the faith
- It is not consistent to claim to be converted but not be surrendered to Christ

Thirdly, we need people who will nurture and encourage new Christians

- Those of us who are parents know that the younger are children were
- The more careful we were when thinking about someone to look after them
- It would be foolish to think that God our heavenly Father thought differently
- Isn't it the case that the local Christian church is really a spiritual midwifery unit
- If that is so I'll be brave enough to say that there are some local churches
- That I would scarcely trust with a wheelbarrow let alone a new Christian
- What about you? Could you be trusted to nurture and encourage a new Christian
- The nurturing and encouragement of Ananias and Barnabas can be easily overlooked
- Not least because they did not lock Saul in the spiritual nursery but sent him on

Fourthly, we need people with powerful testimonies

- But we have to be careful
- Some people who could have had powerful testimonies speak about themselves
- When the essence of a powerful testimony is that it is not about me but about Jesus

Paul received the challenge of Christ

- I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting

Paul was changed by Christ

- Now get up and go into the city

Paul was given the charge of Christ

- You will be told what you must do

There is something great that God can do through us however young or old we are

- However, the younger we are the more energetic we can be, the longer we have
- And so we must not forget that the apostles seem to have been in the prime of life
- One such young man was Sundar Singh
- Born in 1899 Sundar Singh's mother died when he was 14 years old
- Her death plunged him into despair, he turned on the Christian missionaries
- Persecuted Christians and burned his Bible page by page
- That night he decided that he would end his life on a railway line
- However, before the night was over, he saw a vision of Jesus and heard his voice
- He was dramatically converted and resolved to witness for Christ to his life's end
- He was immediately tested as his father demanded that he give up this conversion
- When he would not his father denounced him and expelled him from the family
- Having given him poisoned food in an effort to kill him
- Sundar Singh was saved with the help of a nearby Christian community
- Was baptised and soon decided to wear the yellow robe and turban of a holy man
- He must have looked a bit strange, a tall, vigorous, good looking teenager
- Dressed in the robes of a sadhu, who would normally sit begging or meditating
- Sadhu Sundar Singh was a sadhu with a difference, showing the people of India
- That Jesus Christ was the Saviour of Indian people too
- He travelled all over India, barefoot, preaching the gospel – earning the name
- 'The apostle of the bleeding feet'
- he had been saved to tell others the gospel until, in 1929, aged 30
- he disappeared in the foothills of the Himalayas and was not seen again

There are no superstars in the Christian faith – all the glory rightly belongs to Jesus

- we are committed to a God that acts through events – objective historical events
- we are not committed just to ideas or to experiences but to God acting in the world
- through creation, the Exodus, the Law, the Promised Land, Kingdom, Restoration
- through Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended, glorified, coming again
- through the power of the Spirit; Pentecost, the preaching of Peter, conversion of Saul

Paul received the challenge of Christ: I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting

Paul was changed by Christ: Now get up and go into the city

Paul was given the charge of Christ: You will be told what you must do