

From Confrontation to Conversion

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[0:00] I realized before I want to jump in today, I want to do a quick recap of last week. As many of you know, my previous profession was as a teacher. I know there are teachers! Show your hand if you're a teacher. Excellent. Look at that. Loud and proud. Now, homework.

I set up some homework last week. Some of you are getting triggered right now. I set up some homework last week because last week I spoke on Acts 8. I spoke about the Ethiopian and at the end of our time I said, hey, is the Holy Spirit speaking to you that is putting someone on your heart and your mind that you need to act upon? Actually, who was here last week? Raise your hand. Keep it up. Brilliant. Okay. Keep up your hand if you did what I asked you to do. I won't ask you to talk, but I asked you to think of someone and to actually then act on it. Praise God. All five of you. Praise God. Thank you very much. And you know, whether it actually did something immediately or whether it will take a long time, it really doesn't matter. It's none of our business. The whole point is actually that whatever we take from the scriptures, whatever we take from God teaching us during these times, the hope is that we then go out and actually do something about it. You don't just come and listen to me speak and then you just, I say it and then you pretend you've done it. And then you go. That's not really the purpose of why we gather here. The purpose is when we open up the word and God speaks to us and the Holy Spirit guides us is then we're like, oh, I need to do something. I didn't realize that actually being a Christian isn't just on my Sunday morning for 90 minutes. It's actually for the rest of the week. So I'm encouraging us. Can we keep doing that? Can we keep responding to whatever the Lord is asking us to do? Because the kingdom of God, Christianity spreads not through programs, but through people who are willing to go. That's it. Matthew 28, when Jesus says, go and make disciples of all nations, all cultures, all ethnicities, you must go and leave your comfort zone. And when we do that, then that's when people are converted. That's when people come into the faith, but it requires obedient people who are receptive to whatever the Holy Spirit is saying and then have the guts to actually follow through and actually do it. All while being completely free from the burden that, oh, I must save that person. No, you can't save that person. Only God can save. We just have to be the obedient vessel that actually is willing to drop a text and say, hey, felt the Lord remind me to pray for you and here's my prayer. That's it. And you'll be surprised. I promise you, you will be surprised.

It won't work every time, at least from our vantage point, from our eyes. But my goodness, God works through obedient people because it's people that bring about the kingdom of God. It's people who bring about conversion. You see Philip going from Jerusalem to Samaria and then going to the desert road and then basically converting the Ethiopian who I like to think then goes back into the higher echelons of Ethiopian government and then brings about the kingdom of God there. And I can see that's how God works through all of us. Today, we're going to be talking about a very special man. We're going into Acts 9. Probably, I dare say, the second most important man in all of human history. Okay, so if Jesus is the first one. Now, whether you're a Christian or not, you can't argue about Jesus because Jesus, whether you believe him or not, he split time in half. Most Western societies based on everything that he taught. So actually, with Jesus, we know that he's the most significant. But the second most significant is the one we're talking about today. Paul. Who here went to St. Paul's co-ed school?

Paul. There are a few shy people. I was going to pick on Dr. Alex, but he's not here today. He's only here about half the time. Now, St. Paul's co-ed? St. Paul's college. I can't tell the difference, but apparently, if those who went to them can tell, one will swear that the other one is better. Actually, in Tsai Ing-pun, there's St. Paul's, and then next door, there's St. Stephen's.

And I was like, oh, isn't that interesting? Acts 7 and Acts 8, right just off Bonham Road in Hong Kong. Can you see the effects of these people who are obedient to God spreading to the other side

of the world where there are schools named after them? Saul slash Paul, of course, is the most prolific church planter of all time, the greatest evangelist of all time. We are likely not sat here without Paul.

[4:30] Now, of course, Jesus is the most significant, and actually, it's the spirit of Jesus that used Paul, chose Paul as a chosen instrument to spread the kingdom of heaven, but it was Saul that actually was first confronted by the gospel and then converted by it. Oh, boy. The moment you convert, it changes your life, and then it just spread. And he was the one that took, well, it went from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth. We are activating this final phase where Paul is the one that is taking the kingdom of heaven, the gospel, to the ends of the earth. And today, we're going to look at his account. Now, and I'm going to call it from confrontation to conversion.

Now, part of me thought, well, maybe let's just encounter. Maybe we all just encounter God, and that's really enough. But actually, I think it's not strong enough. I think when we're talking about the gospel, when we're talking about the good news, there is a confrontation that must happen. We see it right here. It is not, I mean, it is terrifying. It is traumatizing. We see Saul get traumatized from this confrontation of the gospel because it is. You think about Luke 5. You think about Peter, who's a skilled fisherman, and then he struggles, and then he meets Jesus, and Jesus tells him, hey, cast your nets on this side, and he realizes, oh my goodness, what's the first thing that Peter says when he realizes who God is, who Jesus is? He falls down. He says, depart from me, for I am a sinner.

He's like, I can't be anywhere near you. This is consistent with every time we see mankind encounter or be confronted by the most holy God is one where you just fall flat on your face. So I don't know what your relationship with God is like. Maybe you've associated him and tied him with your earthly parents, and maybe there's something that we need to process there, but let me tell you, there is fear, and there is reverence, and there is awe that is required, that is necessary, that is basically inevitable. If Jesus walked in here, I don't know what you're going to do. I don't know whether you're going to go to him and go, hey, Jesus, I have a few things, a few bones I need to pick with you. I mean, good luck with that. If Jesus walks in here, I'm falling flat on my face because I am a sinner, and I am in need of a savior. When the gospel comes into our lives, there is a confrontation.

There is a wrestle. There is a battle because we have been living following our flesh, but when the spirit comes in, it just blows your mind, and you see here Paul, a Jew, a Roman citizen, a Pharisee.

[6:56] His CV was incredible, probably the most moral, upright, intellectual person that you and I will ever meet. Philippians 3, and later, he talks about this. He says, if anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more. That's what he says, right? I'm a Hebrew of Hebrews. I was circumcised on the eighth day. I was of the tribe of Benjamin. As to the law, a Pharisee. That means I knew the word. As to the zeal, I was a persecutor of the church. That's an interesting one because do you remember a couple chapters ago, Stephen was killed, and this young man, probably in his 30s, saw people went up to him and gave them his garments, and so basically he was the one that approved all this, right? So he was a Pharisee that actually knew, but something in his defense, he says, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church. What he's saying, hey, I cared enough about the truth.

My truth, the truth that I, the convictions that I had, the life that I had devoted myself to, I cared enough about it that I went to hunt down these people called Christians, these people of the way, because I think they were doing something wrong. So you say, hey, okay, my convictions were misguided. They were wrong, but you can't fault me for not having conviction. That's what he's saying.

And so he has this whole CV, and yet the moment he's confronted with the gospel, he falls at his feet, he is blinded, and suddenly you realize, everything that I once thought I knew about myself, about God, is completely blown out the water. And that's what we're going to be reading today. It's a fascinating account. Acts chapter 9, verse 1 to 19, I think. Can I invite you to stand for the word of the Lord? Sarah is going to minister to us and read to us the word.

Acts chapter 19, verse 1 to 19. But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 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, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.

The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, Ananias. And he said, here I am, Lord. And the Lord said to him, rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. For behold, he is praying. And he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias. Come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight. But Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem.

[10 : 14] And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name. But the Lord said to him, go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine, to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him, he said, brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight. And he was filled with the Holy Spirit. And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes. And he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized. And taking food, he was strengthened.

This is the word of the Lord. Praise be to God. Thank you, sir. Please take a seat. I'm not going to do all the talking today by myself. I think you're going to get bored of me. But there will be a friend I'm going to invite up a little bit later. But first, let's equate ourselves with the story here. So chapter seven, Stephen gets murdered. Saul witnesses it and sees it. And we'll come back to that a little bit later. And from there, and then Saul starts to basically, he goes from witness to then basically the perpetrator, the aggressor. He goes into people's homes and drags them out and puts them into prison. So he's hunting down people of the way. And then it goes into chapter eight, talked last week, talked about Philip going into Samaria and then meeting the Ethiopian. And then chapter nine, we go back to Saul. But Saul still breathing threats and murder. He is so angry. He is so, and I'll talk a little bit about that later, about why he was so angry about the message that the Christians were carrying. So he goes around and he hears about a group that are in Damascus. And so he wants to go to Damascus to hunt these people down. He even has the paperwork to go and drag these people into prison. And that's what he's doing. And so he's heading there. And when he heads there, he is finally confronted by not a set of teaching, not a lifestyle, but the actual person of Jesus himself. And so you see, and asking for letters, verse two, verse three, now as he went on his way, so he's trying to hunt people who were belonging to the way, but as he went on his way, he approached

Damascus and suddenly a light from heaven shone round him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Now in the book of Acts, the author Luke actually writes three times, three different accounts explaining basically what happened here. Okay. In Acts 22 and when 26, you'll see Paul defending himself to different people and explaining different parts of the story. So we know that actually this happened at noon, right at the height of day. So if you've been into the middle, in the Middle East at the height of day, and yet there is still a light that shines so bright that it blinds him and cause him to fall to the ground, that is a strong light. He knew, we know that this was God. And so actually he doesn't know Jesus, but he hears a voice saying, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And he says, who are you, Lord? Now he doesn't know Jesus is Lord, but he obviously knows that this is abnormal. This isn't a human being, human being confronting him. This is God himself. It's funny. He's actually, for someone who knew the law so well, who knew the Old Testament so well as a Pharisee. Before he got blinded here, you could say that he was already blind to the fact that Jesus was the Messiah. In fact, you see this in Luke 24 when Jesus resurrects and he walks with those two men on the walk to Emmaus and he's opening up the scriptures to them and saying, hey, everything that you've heard in the Old Testament, the prophecies that you've read, they're all about me. Jesus actually made the accusation himself in John 5 when he was like, hey, you guys search the scriptures looking for eternal life and you don't realize that it's right in front of you. And so you could say Saul was actually blinded already before

he got blinded by this light. And so Jesus confronts him and he says, please call his name, Saul. Saul, why are you persecuting me? He calls his name twice. I don't know, even this interaction, as traumatizing as it is, it just reeks of relationship. It's Jesus coming up to him and saying, [14:28] Saul, Saul, I know who you are, Saul. Why are you persecuting me? At that moment, of course, Saul is terrified and he's on the floor, but he's like, what do you mean I was persecuting you? I was persecuting a group of people that are pretending to be you and are spreading this news outside. I'm persecuting them. I mean, just the first thought, and actually Sam and I are going to talk a little bit more about this later. You can see right here that our risen Lord, Jesus Christ himself, stands with his church, with his body through suffering. He's not saying, hey, Saul, you're hurting my people. Let my people go. No, he's saying you're persecuting me. When you hurt my church, you hurt me. The Christian God is one that says, actually, I am willing to suffer with you. I am in this with you together, is what he's saying. It also shows that what Saul is doing isn't just going against the will of God. So often when we look at the Old Testament, we see this angry God. We see these rules. Don't do this. Don't do that. Don't do this. Don't do that because you need to be a good person. The moment you really understand who God is is when you realize every time you do something like that, it's not just breaking the rules that he set for you. It's breaking his heart.

And you see, this Christian God isn't one that is distant, just ruling over you, domineering over us. It's a God who actually suffers with us, hurts with us. And so he's saying, hey, you are persecuting me. And again, he's not saying, Saul, follow my ways. He's saying, follow me. When Jesus says, I am the way, the truth, and the life, he's saying, actually, it's not just a lifestyle.

It's not just a set of values that you follow. Why are you a Christian? I guess is the question that we really want to ask. In our small group on Monday, Mr. Brown asked us that question.

What is a Christian? Maybe I'll finish with you, Mr. Brown, and you can give us the model answer in a minute. But let me go around and just ask, what is a Christian? What have we got? Kelly, what is a Christian to you? If you were to describe a Christian, a follower of Jesus? We said that in our group. I think it was Luana that said someone who believes and loves and follows Jesus. That's definitely a part of what a Christian is. What else is a Christian? Shigala, what do you think?

Someone who has received the Holy Spirit. The moment you choose to declare that Jesus is Lord, of course, that's the Holy Spirit that is allowing you to do it. And every Christian has the Holy Spirit living inside them, for sure. That's good. One more. Paul, what's a Christian to you? Describe what a Christian is. Someone who believes that Jesus died and rose again. Absolutely.

[17:10] It's someone who actually recognising the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Dr. Brown, bring us home. What's a Christian to you? Shall we get him to expand? Expand, Mr. Brown.

That's the end of the sermon, everyone. Shall we bow down? Shall we bow down and we'll pray? I'm not going to embarrass him. He's not easily embarrassed anyway. I don't believe he is.

And I set us up because I threw him an alley-oop because I knew he was fully capable of doing that. Here's my hope. Here's my dream. That all of us are, in our own ways, able to do that. Able to articulate what the gospel is. Able to articulate what a follower of Christ actually is.

Someone who actually is in union with Jesus Christ, who identifies with Jesus Christ, so that when God sees us, he sees Jesus Christ. That's it. I mean, mine was going to be much less intellectual and much less smart.

It's kind of like when all of you look at MJ and you go, Oh, he's so cute. He looks just like you. And then you get me all confused and you think I'm cute. And then, oh, he's like a little James.

[18:34] When we're Christians, people look at us and go, You identify. You are in union with your Lord. You look just like Jesus. That's what it means. But, of course, that was what we were intended to be.

That's why, in Genesis 1.26, it says, The Godhead said, Let us make man in our image. And then we stray away from that. The moment we choose that, the connection is severed.

And that is the fall. And that's why we are where we are right now. And I don't have any more hair. And I'm not the perfect person that God made me to be. Because we are in a fallen world now.

But the goal is, as Jesus came back, once his spirit, once Shagala said, once his spirit is inside us, we are now being conformed to the image of the Son, which is what Romans 8 talks about.

That's the goal of what a Christian is. Because Paul, when he encounters this Jesus, it's not Jesus' teachings. It's not teachers' values. Jesus' values, it's not his lifestyle.

[19:31] It's the person of Jesus himself. Many years later, in 1 Corinthians, he talks about this. He's like, there's only really one thing that's important. 1 Corinthians 15. This Jesus died, and he rose again.

That is of first importance. That is the only thing that matters. Why? Because if he didn't rise from the dead, my preaching is futile. My faith is futile. Everything that we do is in vain. And that day, on the road to Damascus, Paul encountered the living Christ.

That's what we believe. And that's what we see here. And this confrontation that he experienced is what converted him. The question I have for us is, have we truly been confronted by the gospel? I asked you, why are you a Christian? Because there's got to be a moment. There's got to be a moment. And Tim Keller puts it in such a simple, eloquent way. He says, the gospel is when you realize you are far worse than you ever imagined. When you are confronted with that truth, and I was confronted with that truth this week as I was looking at myself, having a fight with my wife, losing massively in this fight, and just going, man, there is sin inside me.

Ah, what a wretched man I am. When we are confronted with that, when we are reminded of the bad news, and then we are confronted with the living God.

[20:48] And yes, we are far worse than we ever imagined. But then the second part is that we are far more loved than we ever dare dream, is what Tim Keller said. But first, it requires that confrontation.

And I wonder whether we have actually experienced that. Paul finally got it, but it took a very traumatizing confrontation that left him blind for three days. Can you imagine this?

Paul of Tarsus, a Jew, a Roman citizen, had everything that he ever needed. You can't match his CV, and yet in those three days, can you imagine what he's going through?

He would have remembered all the scriptures in his head, and he has to get led away. And so he will sit there for three days, and he's so traumatized, he can't even eat. So he's fasting, he can't even drink. And he's just blind with his own thoughts.

Can you imagine what he's thinking? I'm just going to have a guess here. I have been so blind. Not eyes blind, I've been so blind. How did I miss this? How did I miss the fact that over 300 prophecies in the Old Testament point to this person of Jesus, and I was so busy trying to persecute people who were trying to say this?

[21:55] I have been so blind. But in that moment, there was no promise that he would recover his sight. Just those three days, I would have just been thought, this is the end. The mistakes I've made.

The murders. Confronted with his depravity. Confronted with the gospel. When we are confronted with the gospel, two things happen in my eyes. We are both humbled, and we are horrified.

Because you realize, everything that I've been trying to do to become a good person, it just isn't true. It won't work. This isn't how I get there. I'll talk a little bit more about that later.

And then, of course, there is the conversion. And this is another person that I find is really interesting. Verse 10 says this. So now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias, and the Lord said to him in a vision, Ananias, and said, Here I am, Lord.

So this guy's praying. He's obviously just waiting on, focusing on God. And so he says, Here I am. And then the Lord says this. Rise and go to the street called Straight at the house of Judas.

[22:55] Look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. For behold, he is praying, and he is seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight. So he's praying. Can you imagine Ananias?

Good man. He's praying. He's like, Oh, here I am, Lord. Send me. Use me. Just give me specific directions to the name of the road, to the house, and I'll do whatever it is you say. Oh, thank you, Lord.

Yep, yep, I hear it. Straight. The street called Straight. Great, great, great. Sorry, God. Sorry, God. I am here, and I will go. But there was a moment, there was a second there where I think I heard you, I think I misheard, but I think I heard you say the name Saul.

But you see, this is funny because there's another guy called Saul who's been hunting my friends and family down, who have been dragging my friends to prison. It's really funny, God. I'm sure you made a mistake. It sounded like him, but you're not sending me to that guy.

I'm sure. I'm sure of it because that would be a suicide mission, God. So can you just say it again or just maybe send an email just in case it was a typo. So it's not that Saul, is it, God? Sometimes

when we ask God to give us specific instructions, we have to be prepared that it won't be what we like.

[24:07] And so God responds to him. He says, God doesn't really address his fear necessarily.

He just says, go, I have chosen him. I am the one who does this. Just a side point here. I keep saying, it's the Holy Spirit that does the stuff, everything. Can you just see? He's just like pulling all the strings.

He's like, you do this. In Acts 10, which we'll do in two weeks, he does the same thing. He talks to Peter. He talks to Cornelius. He's the one who's pulling all the strings. As we are sat here, that's what we're asking for.

God, Holy Spirit, would you speak to us? Show us where you want us to go, what you want us to do. So it is all the Holy Spirit. But what's his methodology? What's his way of doing it? Through people.

He could convert Saul himself in that moment, but yet he chooses Ananias to empower the chosen instrument that he has. We all need people.

[25:09] Even the greatest, most prolific church planter evangelist needed someone to comfort him, help him, pray for him. What makes us think that we can do it on our own? We need people who are obedient.

We need no people who are trusting. And he's saying, hey, I have chosen this person and he will suffer for my name. It reminds me again in Philippians, when Paul is writing later to the church in Philippi, saying actually, for the sake of Christ, you would not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the conflict that I have and now here that I still have.

He's saying, when we believe in Christ, it's not just, it's not just all roses from here. It's not the blessings that we will receive, not just the blessings, but it is hard.

And Paul, Saul, I've chosen him. He's going to be my chosen instrument. And by the way, instruments cannot play themselves. They still need the Holy Spirit to be the one that plays, but he will be my chosen instrument and I will use him to go to the ends of the earth.

But he will suffer. So before you go home and pray today, Holy Spirit, send me, just be prepared for that. Because if it happened to our Lord, then what makes us think it won't happen to us?

[26:26] The question really isn't whether what we prefer. The question is whether this is true or not, whether Jesus really did rise from the dead. Because if he did rise from the dead, it is worth anything that we'll do. It is worth taking that cross and following him.

And Ananias didn't know what he was expecting. He must have said bye to his friend. He's like, guys, I've got to go. I've got a mission. It's impossible. Or at least I won't come back from this. I will see you.

And then he goes, thank God for Ananias. Because I don't think we would be here without Paul. I don't think we'd be here without Ananias. And as he goes and prays, and he goes, brother Saul. Brother. Embraces him. And he prays for him. The Holy Spirit comes upon him. Scales fall from his eyes, and he gets to see. And then, of course, he gets baptized, and then he does the second most important thing, which he eats.

And then he is strengthened, and then he goes. What a confrontation, and what a conversion. I guess the question for us is, have you converted to Christianity?

[27:32] Maybe I'll just ask you to be brave again. Have you converted to Christianity? Put your hand up if you would say you have converted to the way of Jesus. It's not a trick question, guys. It's not a trick. You see, with Christianity, here's the thing.

It isn't something that you just sign up to, and you say, there is a conversion that happens. There is a change in direction. If you go and change your module, and if you convert the module that you're doing at university, you are going to a different classroom.

You are studying a different subject. If you go and convert your Hong Kong dollars into a different currency, you are converting it, and you're saying that, I am going to go somewhere else, and I'm going to use this money there.

It changes your life. For those of us who said, I have converted to Christianity, the question I have for us is, well, is your life converted? Because if you say that you have converted to Christianity, but your life hasn't really converted, then I would say you haven't even converted.

There is a pastor who says this, you can't react moderately to Jesus Christ. You can't say, Jesus, I believe you, I follow you, but I'm also just going to follow my own way.

[28:34] It's not possible. Can you see? It doesn't actually make sense. The moment you are confronted with the gospel, you can't help but convert and follow this new way, and this new way is drastically different from your old way.

And it doesn't make sense. And there is suffering. And there is hardship. But it is true. And it is abundant. And it is satisfying. And it is eternal. Confrontation and conversion.

I want to stop here for a second. As I started, all of this, why we gather here, why we open up this book, and we believe this book gives us the words of life that we need to navigate this broken world, this world where it is completely broken.

Just look at the news this week, and you will see that there is brokenness in this world. But why do we, as followers of Christ, still have hope? It's because we believe there is a Savior who stepped into this brokenness and had his own body broken for us.

And through that, he redeems and he restores. And he heals this world. There's no point in us reading this book, looking at an account like this, going, wow, that's crazy.

[29:41] I wish when I was walking somewhere, Jesus would encounter me, confront me. And we look at stories like this, whether it's here, or we look at some of the letters that Paul's writing, the epistles, that are just filled with just rich theology and doctrine.

If you're like me, sometimes we read these and we just skip over them and just go, oh, it was a cool story. But it doesn't change the way we live. We don't convert to the way of Jesus. We're just reading.

Sometimes, most of the time, we don't even understand. So what I want to do during these times is actually really see if we can be equipped in actually being able to read scripture, understand it, see how it applies to our lives, and then actually cause it to change our lives.

And so some questions I like to ask, I mean, I'm sure all of you have read the Bible and gone, I don't understand that passage, but I'm too lazy to go into a commentary. I'm too lazy to even use AI, so I'm just going to, I've done my reading and I'm going to go.

When that's happened, often I try and ask myself a few questions. They're not my own. It's based on, inspired by DBS, the Discovery Bible, study kind of questions, inductive Bible studies, which is just, what's this passage telling me about God?

[30:47] What's this passage telling me about me? And where's the good news here and how can I apply it and who do I share it with? That's it. Those are the questions I'm asking. Once I'm engaging with it more, then I start looking into the context and where this happened, the culture that it happened in and all these kind of things, but really I start with what is it trying to tell me?

And so actually, Sam, can you come and join me up here? I actually posed these questions to Sam at the beginning of the week and I was like, actually, Sam, can you read this passage with me? Can you pray over this passage with me?

And can you just reflect on these things with me? And maybe there's something for you to share with me today over here as well. So we're going to spend maybe 10 minutes or so just going through that. Hey, Sam.

Hi. I'll get you another mic in a minute. But as you look at this passage, what was the first thing that came to mind for you, whether it's what it's telling you about yourself or whether it's telling you about God? I think you touched on it earlier, James, when you mentioned Jesus being in the midst of suffering, of persecution.

I think back to Martha and Mary coming out to Jesus, right? Lazarus had died and they both say the same thing. Scripture says, both of them say, Lord, if you've been here earlier, then my brother would not have died, right?

[31:58] And the first time, we kind of imagine the stoic response from Christ. And the second time, Mary says the same thing. And Jesus is just moved to compassion. I'm reminded of that as you were sharing that God is in the midst of our suffering, right?

Yeah. And of course, tell us how that's impacted you over the years. You've had your fair share of trauma and pain and suffering. What's that done for you? I think it's in suffering when God is most real.

I think a prayer for many is like, God, I want to experience you. We pray things like, I want to be filled with the Holy Spirit, right? We see Ananias laying hands here on Paul and he's filled with the Spirit.

We love these moments. But in the day-to-day, I think as we work out what it means to be a Christian, to find that place where heaven meets earth, we're wondering what does life with God look like?

And we're in a culture where we want to escape suffering, don't we? Where we don't like pain. But it's in the pain, I think, that God is most real. And that's something that can't be just told to you.

[33:14] I think you have to go through it, right? And just those words that Jesus had, it's not, hey, why are you persecuting my underlings far away? It's like, why are you persecuting me?

And that would have just pierced, I think, pierced Saul's heart, right? I mean, what else? As you were praying through this this week, what did this passage, what do you think this passage is, God is using to tell us about us, humanity and people?

I think about us, you know, blindness, you touched on that. It's a real thing.

I think, I also think about purpose here. As someone who grew up in the church, my parents were believers, and so, I think for many believers who grew up in the faith, we get to a point where we need to make it our own.

A question, I think many of us ask is, what is my purpose? And we look at someone like Saul, and it's inspiring. We were all struck by this amazing sense of purpose that God gave him.

[34:23] I think, I reflect on that, and I think to myself, what does that say about us today? We're so hungry, we're starving for purpose, here for significance, right?

Maybe there's something in me that I'm looking too inwardly, and this challenges me to look outwardly. In Paul, I see, he's so zealous against the Christian Jews, Jews, excuse me, and later on when he's spoken to, the Lord says in verse 15, go, he's a chosen instrument of mine to carry the name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

Here's a shift in purpose here for Saul. He was devoting his life to correcting the Jewish faith as he saw fit, and then God turns that purpose around.

For me, I have to adjust my posture, and look, there are things that I guess I don't want to do, but God, because of you, I will do it.

I will do it faithfully. And it's that hard, because God doesn't need us to do anything. Especially, I imagine, Paul here, his CV would have been just outstanding.

[35:36] I've been thinking even someone like him as a debater would have been nearly impossible to be. And yet, in 1 Corinthians 1, which is my own reading, it's been, Paul's saying, it's not even about that.

It's not my lofty speech. It's not my eloquent words. It's not my wisdom. It's just the power that is at the cross, and it's the wisdom of God, which is Christ, and that's it. And I come to you with just fear and trembling, almost, and weakness, because that's all that's needed.

And I guess that's a heart thing, right? I mean, as you look at this passage, where's the gospel here? What's the good news for you? I think God's timing here is key.

The believers must have been praying for so long for justice. You know, the blood on the ground, they're crying out for justice. And you mentioned this was a heavy news week, right, for Americans especially.

And that prayer, I think, is a felt one here. I'm seeing God's timing here. That's how I see God at work. I'm seeing God's compassion here.

[36:38] And I see, through the life of Ananias, God choosing to, you know, choosing to use us as we are waiting and willing. and you painted a wonderful picture of Ananias just waiting.

I think that's a prayer many of us have had. God, I'm here, you know, use me. And then bringing it back to a year ago when you talked about Jonah, it's, it's something, we're, that's a dangerous prayer because absolutely, God might ask us to do something that we don't want to do.

I mean, I guess, I think you just answered that final bit is, where do we take this passage like this? How do we apply it to our lives? And who do we, who do we share it with? I see a few trends here.

I think, for some of us, it may be Ananias, just a joy of being the hands and feet of Jesus. God, God didn't have to ask Ananias to be the conduit of healing.

He, he gets to, right? Ephesians 2.10, like we are the workmanship of Christ, right? There's work prepared beforehand that we should walk in them, right?

[37:45] So, so we get to participate. I imagine a house being built, right? And, and God, the designer, the blueprint, everything's made and he's inviting us to partake in that, right?

And, and if the contractor doesn't show up, then someone else comes in and does the job. But it's a joy that we have, that we get to serve the Lord. And I think that's, that's Ananias here.

For, for Saul, I think where we live is we, we get, we have to look at others with, with grace. If someone as evil as Saul can become the second most prominent person in your, in your eyes, then, then grace can, can rescue anyone.

And for me, finally, I guess if I peek ahead to the rest of the verses here in, in chapter nine, where it speaks briefly about Barnabas. Barnabas is the one who vouches for, for Saul and, and is a character witness.

So, I wonder if any of us are in the midst of seeing a life transformed and, and we are the character witness that encourages the rest of the church, but also the person who's in the middle of being transformed.

[38:47] That is so good. Thank you, Sam. Thank you. Can we give him a round of applause? I think it's so important and I encourage you, well, Paul needed Adonai, he needed Barnabas.

We need people around to help us look at these, look at these words of life and help us to decipher them, understand them and then apply them and hold us accountable to it so we're not just reading and then just leaving it, but there is more to it.

And honestly, as I, as I look more into this character of Saul, Paul, I'm like, this guy, these can, the conviction that he had, the skill that he had, the humility that he had, I almost kind of see where he's coming from in a lot of these things.

And it made me think, well, why, why was he, why was he so angry? Why was he so angry with people belonging to the way? I mean, maybe quick final thoughts.

Why was he so angry, do you think? Broke tradition. Oh my goodness. That is, can you imagine Saul having grown up with all the tradition that he would have to, all the sacrifices that he would have had to make to become a Pharisee?

[39:56] And then yet he stands and he sees this Stephen giving this sermon of his life. And what's the sermon basically saying? Is that there's nothing that Paul didn't know, the stories, but then Stephen's also saying God is doing away with the temple.

God is doing away with the tabernacle. God is doing away with the priesthood. God is doing away with the sacrificial system. And he's like, how dare you? Do you know who I am?

Do you know what I've built my life upon? Do you know what? Everything I've ever known, everything I've worked for is that I would be the best, the most moral, upright human being that pleases God.

And you're here telling me that I'm never going to be good enough. Can you see? That's where he's coming from. That's why the Christian message is so offensive. When he meets and is confronted by the living Jesus, he's like, none of it matters anymore.

I will never be good enough. But if I follow him, if I identify with him, if I am in union with him, if I commit to being the place where heaven meets earth in him, what's true of him is now true of me, that changes everything.

[41:17] That's what, that's why he was so angry. That's why he needed this traumatic experience to get him to a place to understand we are never going to be good enough, but in Christ Jesus, we are more than good enough.

And that's all we need. There's a pastor in England many years ago who asked this question, Martin Lloyd-Jones. He asked, he likes to ask people, are you a Christian today?

And often he'll be, well, he'll get responses like, I'm trying to be a Christian. I'm trying to be a good Christian until you realize that that actually is the wrong answer, that there is no such thing as a good Christian.

You can't try to be a Christian until you realize that actually Christianity is something that you receive. It is not something that you can achieve. Paul spent all of his life trying to achieve the status, achieve the righteousness.

He was blameless under the law. But until you realize that it is something that you receive, when you acknowledge who Jesus is, the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus and what that actually meant that he paid for our sins and paid for our debts and because he paid for our debts, when God looks at us and when we believe in him, then he sees Jesus, which means our debts are now paid.

[42:31] And what is true of Jesus is now true of us, the moment that happens and you realize, oh, it's got nothing to do with me. It's everything to do with who he is and what he did for us and that's it.

That moment then changes everything. As I was saying, there's my own reading in 1 Corinthians, 1 Corinthians chapter 4, I encourage you to read it. I've just found I really loved it this week because Paul is just so passive-aggressive.

Actually, he's not even passive. He's just aggressive. He's like, what do you have that you didn't receive from God? Even I don't judge myself. I don't care what you think anymore. Why? Because I met the living Christ and that is all that matters.

Right? That's what he says. I don't care about anything anymore because of him and I met him and he is real. And that's why in chapter 9 later, he goes to Damascus and all he says is, he is the son of God.

That's it. End of story. He's the OG, Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. It doesn't matter about me. It's all about him. That moment frees you. That's what a Christian is.

[43:30] I think my brother shared this one time from somewhere he had heard and he said, actually, how do you know that you will get to heaven? If you die today, how will you know that you get to heaven? You can start thinking about what that answer might be and maybe the majority of people outside, well, I think I get to heaven because I've been a pretty good person.

I've donated to a few good charities. On the whole, I've been okay. I haven't stolen anything apart from when I was young in a tuck shop and I stole some chocolate but otherwise, I'm okay. His point was, if your answer to that question, how do you know you can get to heaven?

If it starts with, oh, because I, then it's over. You won't get there. You haven't been confronted with the gospel. The only answer that is acceptable is because Jesus.

That's it. Because of what Jesus did and that frees us not to mean that we don't do good works, not to mean that we don't allow God to conform us to this image of his son but it starts with that.

Would we be confronted by the gospel and then would we be converted and then when we realize that actually it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us. Oh. That's when it changes.

[44:39] When Paul realized in Philippians 3 that it's not about having a righteousness on my own but a righteousness of God that depends on faith. That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, that I may share his suffering becoming like him in his death and by any means possible attain the resurrection from the dead.

That is all Paul cared about. That is all we should care about. May we be confronted with the gospel today. May we be comforted by those around us today.

And may we convert to following the way of Jesus. Not a set of values, not a lifestyle, not just a teaching but the person of Jesus himself, the resurrected God who lives inside us.

Are we open to that? Are we receptive to that? Are we hungry for that? That's the only thing that matters. I'm going to ask me here and the band to lead us in a song of response and this song is exactly that.

that everything that we do, we do because of Christ who lives inside us. Again, in Philippians, can you tell it's my favorite letter? I think it was Paul's favorite church as well.

[45:56] Many years later he goes and then he says, I've learned the secret of being content in any and every circumstance I've learned the secret of facing anything. Hunger, abundance, need, it doesn't matter.

I can do all things through him who strengthens me. Let us have that same openness to Christ apported.

Can we bow our heads and we'll respond now.