

SLIDE 1 20240211 SRCF

Witness to the Power to Convert and Transform Acts 9:1-22

SLIDE 2 ¹ Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

SLIDE 3 ⁷ The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. ¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.

SLIDE 4 ¹² *In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.* "

¹³ *"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."*

¹⁵ *But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."*

SLIDE 5 ¹⁷ *Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord -- Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here -- has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."*

¹⁸ *Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.*

SLIDE 6 *Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take*

them as prisoners to the chief priests?"²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

SLIDE 7 Context:

Extra-judicial killings.

In Acts 7 Stephen had been murdered by stoning – the Jewish preferred way of execution.

Acts 8 begins:

Acts 8:1-3

And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.² Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

The positive result was that the Jerusalem church was scattered and the church's mission expanded.

We are all familiar with destroying a group whether it is religious, political or ethnic. For example, Israel is trying to destroy Hamas, ISIS has been reduced by the international community to take the recent conflicts in the Middle East as examples.

The disciples of Jesus were subject to persecution from this point on, almost without a break until today. And persecution rages in many parts of the world today.

Jesus was quite clear it was a consequence of being a follower of him. Nobody wants persecution but it is part of being a follower of Jesus.

In Matthew 5:10-12 Jesus said

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
¹¹ *“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

So be encouraged! The world is a dismal place to live in because of sin, but we seek a home kept in heaven for you!

Anyway, getting back to the story, Saul gets his written authority to arrest ‘Followers of the Way’. If you are not familiar with the terms ‘disciple’, ‘follower of Jesus’, ‘follower of the way’, that is because in a few chapters time, chapter 11:26 to be precise, followers of the way were called Christians in a place called Antioch and it stuck. But we need to remember that we are not called to some religion but to follow Jesus, who is the way the truth and the life. It is what he says or those inspired by the Holy Spirit wrote in the Bible that is our guide to holy living.

It may seem strange to us that Saul could have such authority after all, Damascus was in Syria so over the border. However, the Romans had an treaty with the Sanhedrin that their authority extended to all Jews including those who lived abroad. So Saul was extraditing them back to Jerusalem for punishment, maybe re-education.

That was the plan!

SLIDE 8 However, God had different ideas. God had chosen Saul because that's what God does. He chooses the most unlikely characters to display the wonders of his grace. Saul was an enemy committed to exterminating this new gospel that God offers you salvation, not by what you do but by what he has done in Jesus.

But Jesus stops Saul dead in his tracks. His glory is displayed for a brief moment, brighter than the noon day sun. And Saul falls of his horse. His companions are in shock. And Jesus has a little chat with Saul to set him straight.

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

In 15 seconds, Jesus has completely blown Saul's thinking.

First Saul has discovered Jesus is alive.

Second that Jesus takes persecution of his disciples personally

Thirdly Saul has a change of command.

No longer is he going to Damascus to persecute Jews who follow a dead Jesus, he is going to Damascus because he has been commanded by the living Jesus.

Saul tells this story repeatedly. We know of at least 2 occasions when he tells it.

Acts 22:4-21 immediately after his arrest in Jerusalem.

26:12-18 before Agrippa

SLIDE 9 What's your story? It may not be as spectacular as Saul's but it is just as authentic. Your Damascus Road event may have taken years but it is your story of how God stepped into your life and transformed you, forgave your sins, gave you eternal life, and poured out his Holy Spirit into your life. For me it happened when I was 8. I was at Sunday School and my Sunday School teacher challenged me to make a personal commitment to Jesus rather than just be in a Christian Family, doing Christian things. I went home and because we had visitors, locked myself in the bathroom, knelt by the bath and asked Jesus to be my personal Saviour.

My story is one of many but is beyond dispute. God had chosen to show his grace to me to give me new life and although I didn't know it, his Holy Spirit into my life.

Your story is important, even if it is not spectacular. That is why testimony times are so important. We tell one another what God has done.

But Saul didn't just tell his friends he told it to the mob that were wanting to stone him. He told it to the Roman authorities of the time as his defence that he was following the truth.

Your best defence to your non-Christian friends of why you do things differently to them is quite simple tell what God has done in your life.

SLIDE 10 Lets now look at what actually happened.

Saul is stopped in his tracks. Literally. But he has met the living Lord Jesus. Up to now, he thought the followers of the way were a deluded bunch, persuaded that Jesus was alive by a group of Northerners who had actually stolen the body away. Now Saul is faced with the reality that all he had been told and all he fanatically believed about Jesus was bunk. He was like many of our friends, family and colleagues today. Convinced that your good news is a delusion. Jesus may have been a good man but he couldn't still be alive. As Paul was later to write

in 1 Corinthians 15:17 - 18 *if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*

What will transform their thinking will be the realisation that Jesus is alive. That is a work of the Holy Spirit. You and I are commissioned to tell our story and tell the Good News of Jesus. They won't believe you unless the Holy Spirit steps into and convinces them of *sin, righteousness and judgement*, as Jesus said in John 16:8.

Which brings us to the second point. Saul was challenged by Jesus for persecuting Jesus himself. We all know we do things wrong. But spiritual awakening involves becoming aware that sin is rebellion against God. Sin breaks our relationship with God. It ruins the persons we were created to be. It is recognising the consequences of sin that brings us to ask “*What shall we do?*” (Acts 2:37) - to be saved. Saul was sent into Damascus to find out. On the day of Pentecost the crowd was told “*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*” Acts 2:38

We have to turn from our sin and turn to Christ. When we do so, we receive forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit and a new eternal life.

The third thing that happened to Saul was that he was under Jesus' command. He went to Damascus to find out what he was to do. Salvation involves a change of command in our lives. No longer are we the captain of our own destiny or following some religion or philosophy. We are followers of Jesus.

SLIDE 11 So what happened in Damascus?

I want to pick out 5 things:

Here we see God at work. First in Paul.

Saul was blind for three days

He fasted.

He was told in some detail that Ananias was going to visit him!

So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

Second in Ananias.

All we know about Ananias is that God spoke to him he argued with God and then he obeyed.

¹⁰In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. ¹¹The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.

¹²In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

That's pretty detailed. God gives Ananias the address, details about who Saul is sufficient to identify him.

But Ananias had been on Facebook. He knew all about Saul and the threat of imprisonment. He heard the gossip, which was quite accurate but he didn't know in what way God was involved. It was a monumental request! A bit like putting your head in the mouth of a lion! So Ananias objects to being sent to be arrested. I am not surprised. Let's be honest, we don't normally think of going up to our enemies and saying God has told me you want to be saved.

God does not follow the gossip. He has chosen the enemy of his people to love him and forgive his sins and make him his friend. Saul is the man who wrote later '*while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*' Romans 5:8

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Following Jesus carries a high risk that God will send you on crazy missions. But he promises to go with you. And Ananias is convinced enough of God's integrity to trust him on what appeared initially to be a fool's mission.

The question is 'Would we respond like Ananias or would we decide they wouldn't want to know anyway'? Never assume that anybody is beyond grace. Ananias took the risk and God was able to transform Saul into Paul – a missionary to Europe!

SLIDE 12 What we have learnt along the way is that God's plan has been to turn Saul around and change his mission from destroying the followers of the way to telling the way of salvation far further afield than Damascus. Saul became Paul and his mission would, in time cover most of the Mediterranean and surrounding countries.

¹⁷Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord -- Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here -- has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

¹⁸Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Ananias was a follower of the way. He laid hands on Saul for healing and something like cataracts fell off his eyes and he could see. He was baptized by the church in Damascus, because that is what Jesus had commanded his disciples to do. He broke his fast and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. And beginning where he was he started telling the Good News much to the consternation of the Jewish population in Damascus.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who caused

havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?"²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

So Saul who had gone to Damascus to stamp out the followers of the way who told people that Jesus was alive is transformed into an able apologist for the resurrection. Probably showing that the Messiah of the Old Testament was to die and rise again to live forever. He was witness to the power of God to convert and transform his life.

SLIDE 13 If you have put your faith and trust in Jesus, you have been transformed by God in a similar way. Your story will be very different but the same elements will be there.

- God stepping into your life.
- You being turned round in repentance
- God giving you a new mission in life.
- You have been baptised.
- You have been filled with the Holy Spirit.
- You have to start where you are telling the Good News that Jesus is alive where you are!