

The Gospel to the Pharisee

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Date: 14 May 2017

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[0 : 0 0] So we are in a series on the book of Acts and this morning we are in Acts chapter 9 and this is the story of Saul's conversion and Saul's conversion is probably the most famous conversion experience in all of history. He converts as a Pharisee to Christianity. It's so famous that Christian and non-Christian alike know this story as the Damascus Road experience, right? And basically that little phrase means a sudden change, a sudden change in who you are and what you believe and it's a very famous conversion worldwide. Modern people, especially contemporary people in the West, a lot of times don't like the idea of conversion of this change to a different belief system. They don't like it, they see it oftentimes as primitive, as asking people to believe in just one truth or something like that, but the Bible is really clear about this and Christians throughout all the centuries have been really clear about this idea of conversion, about a deep change from within. Jesus was really clear about it. Matthew 18.3, he said this, unless you are converted and become like a little child, you cannot enter the kingdom of God. And then in John chapter 3, unless someone is born again from the dead, they cannot enter the kingdom of

God, right? It's the same idea as conversion. So the question often arises with this passage is should every single person that is a Christian, that is a believer in Christ, should they be converted or have a conversion experience like this one that we read about in Acts chapter 9? And the answer that's been really consistent throughout history is no. That there are tons of other conversions, the ways people come to believe in Jesus in the Bible that aren't as dramatic as this one, that aren't exactly like Saul's experience on the Damascus Road. But in 1 Timothy 1, 15 to 16, Paul, Saul, who is also Paul, and I'll probably use those names completely interchangeably the whole time without thinking about it. So I'm talking about the same person, Saul also called Paul.

He says that his conversion, his story, was given to the people of God, anybody that would come to believe in later generations as an encouragement. So that's one way to look at it. But another way to look at it is that in Christian theologians throughout all of history have been doing this, that they talk about there's a difference in circumstances of conversion and the elements of conversion.

Circumstances, circumstances are individual, circumstances just an experience. There's no universal circumstance for a conversion experience. But what you can do with this passage is you can look through Paul's circumstances, Saul's circumstances on the Damascus Road and derive some of the elements of conversion. Some of the elements that are true, that are universal no matter whose experience it is. And so I think there are four elements that we can pull from this passage this morning. The first is conversion is for dead people. Secondly, conversion is a crash encounter with the light. Thirdly, conversion is plunging into darkness. And finally, conversion is a transformation that includes an embrace. Okay, so first conversion is for dead people. If you look at verse one of this passage it starts off with a contrast, but Saul. But Saul was breathing threats and murders against the disciples. And the reason there's a contrast there is because in the previous couple of chapters the gospel had been preached and many people were getting converted, but then Saul along with the other Pharisees in Jerusalem persecuted the Christians. You remember the stoning of Stephen in Acts chapter 7. And what happened is that the gospel then left Jerusalem and went all the way as far as

Damascus, which is outside the geographical bounds of Jerusalem. So the gospel spread, it's fruitful, and it's left Jerusalem. The Christians have gone to a different land. They're not even in Israel. They're in Damascus. That's in Syria. But Saul, nevertheless, Saul, he's still breathing threats and the literal word there is breathing slaughter against the Christians no matter where they've gone. So much so that he goes and gets permission to hunt them down. Now this guy Saul, we were introduced to him in Acts chapter 7.

He's a Pharisee and he's very zealous for the works of the law. He's very well educated. He knew classic rhetoric. He knew Greek. He was extremely well educated, but he's incredibly hungry. He's on the hunt here to basically destroy what was called the Way, the early Christian movement. And it makes sense because the way he views religion is that religion is basically Old Testament or Torah, Genesis to Deuteronomy, law observance. And these Christians were going around and preaching a gospel saying a man was crucified on a tree and at his resurrection he declared that nobody has to be under the obligations of the Old Covenant of the Torah anymore, Genesis to Deuteronomy. And this was totally antithetical to the way Paul viewed religion, which is completely about Torah observance, obeying the law of God. So you can understand that he thinks these people are the enemies of God. And so he's on the hunt. This little word for breathing threats here and the little word underneath the verb breathing, the Greek word, it's typically reserved for animals in classical [6:10] Greek. It's reserved to describe an animal that's like a rabid dog. That's what John Calvin, when he's looking at this passage, he describes Saul as a rabid wolf. Maybe you've had an experience like this, probably most of you haven't, if you're from the city, but you've at least seen one on TV probably where somebody goes into an alleyway or into the woods or something and all of a sudden there it is, a wolf, a dog, a bear, whatever, picture, wild animal. And it stops and you stop and you're face to face, right? And what do you think, you're wondering what's it gonna do, right? And all of a sudden it hunches its shoulders up, its ears perk, the lip lowers, the teeth become exposed, and slobber foams start to come out of the mouth, right? And what do you know? And that moment, what do you know? You know that that rabid wolf is getting ready, preparing to attack you. A slow walk begins to ensue towards you, right? That verb breathing threats, that's the way the word is typically used in Greek, okay?

That's the picture that we're being given. Saul is a rabid wolf prone to attack on the Damascus road. I mean, he's going down the road as a general, going to war against the enemies of God. That's the picture that's being painted here.

In chapter 8 verse 3 it said that he had already begun to destroy the church, literally rip its foundations out from underneath it. These are strong verbs, okay, in other words. These are really strong verbs. He has a deep hatred for these people. He has a very deep, deep-seated hatred for the way, the Christian movement. And what that means is that Saul appears to be the most unlikely convert that has ever lived in human history. And you know the rest of the story. He changes. He is changed. And what that means is that no human being, no matter how much they hate God, no matter what they have done, is without the hope of the radically free grace of Jesus Christ. No human being, no matter what they've done. And that means that there is no such thing as a likely or an unlikely convert to Christianity. There's no such thing as people who are likely or unlikely. It's a category mistake. That's not what that... You can see this in... As Paul is writing the rest, most of the books of the New Testament, and he's reflecting on what happened to him, you can see this actually come out in his own theology. Just listen to what he says about who he was and who people are. All have sinned, all have fallen short of the glory of God. No one is good, no one is righteous, no one seeks after God, everyone follows their own way. God has revealed himself to every single human being and all suppress the truth and unrighteousness. Every single person seeks after idols. Every single person suppresses the truth by exchanging the image of the Creator for the image of a creature. All human beings are dead in their trespasses and sins.

So that's his reflection on who he was. And that's why in John 6:44, Jesus puts it like this, no one can come to the Father unless the Father calls. Or in John 15:16, Jesus says, you have not chosen me, but I have chosen you and appointed you to go and bear fruit for me. And so John started when he's looking at this passage, he puts it like this, one thing is certain in Paul's conversion, human beings do not initially seek after God unless God first comes to us and seeks after us. The Bible says that in our natural state no one seeks after God and that this is categorical. In other words, Paul's conversion means that nobody is too far gone to receive the grace of Christ. And what that means is that the first element in conversion experience is that conversion is for dead people. Conversion is for people who are dead. Conversion is always counter to our human will, our human hearts. So that's the first element, conversion is for dead people. Now there are three more elements and I'm just going to give them to you right now in one sentence. Okay, and then we'll break each down briefly. Alright, so here's the sentence. Conversion is a crash encounter with the light that plunges you into darkness and ends in transformation. Okay, so the first aspect is that conversion is a crash encounter with the light. Now in verse 3 you'll see that Saul encounters the

light or actually the light encounters Saul, the little Greek word verb there is actually that the light in circles Saul and we learn in another passage that that light was brighter than the midday sun and what happens to him? It says that it knocks him down and a man of his elite stature in society he's probably riding a horse and so it probably knocks him off of his horse onto the ground. Why? Well in one sense it's the physical power of the light itself. He probably is thinking about this when he writes 1st Timothy 6:16, God dwells in inapproachable light. He had to be reflecting on this experience, but I don't think it's mainly a physical aspect here that the light knocks him to the ground physically. I think what's happening here is that he's having an encounter with the truth. He's having an encounter with the truth. In other words what's happening to him physically manifest a spiritual reality, an invisible reality that's happening underneath. In other words conversion is when you encounter a God that you never expected. When you encounter a God who is beyond anything that you could have possibly constructed, no mere idol. You see typically if you go out in a city like Edinburgh or London or New York or something like that and you ask your average person, modern people in the

West, if you ask them what they don't like about Christianity they're not typically going to say that they don't like Christianity because it preaches a message that says God radically forgives people completely contrary to what they've done. The aspect of Christianity that says God is God of love, God radically forgives people in the West like that. Everybody on the streets likes that about Christianity. Nobody has a problem with that. What do people in the modern West typically not like about the Christian message? That's at the very same time as the Christians preach a God of love, a God who will forgive radically even despite what you've done. We also preach a God who has divine justice and will send people to hell and punish and that's precisely what modern Westerners don't like. Now if you go to eastern parts of the world and this is not true of everyone but typically if you go to eastern parts of the world and you ask the average person what is it that you don't like about Christianity, you'll get something actually completely opposite. They have no problem typically with a God who inflicts wrath or sends people to hell or punishes. No problem with the idea of divine justice because it makes sense.

[14:31] If you've done something wrong and you appear before a courtroom you deserve to be punished. I mean that's normal to that culture and so they don't have a problem with it. What they do have a problem with oftentimes is a God who would radically forgive when you don't deserve it. When you haven't done anything to earn it. It's completely opposite picture you see of problems from the East and the West. You know what that means. That means because of our cultural situation, because of us as individuals in specific cultures, we are prone to construct a God that fits our own personal desires of who we want God to be.

We're prone to make a God that looks exactly like us. Here's conversion. It's encountering a God you could not have possibly created. In other words it's being knocked off your horse by a God that is no mere idol that you couldn't have constructed. You see God has to be something that is greater than who you are, greater than your heart and if the God that you concoct in your head just looks exactly like what you want God to look like then he wouldn't be greater than you. He wouldn't be beyond your heart, greater than your heart and a God that's not greater than your heart can't be a God that's greater than you.

The first thing here about conversion is that we need a God who we don't expect and that means that when we come to the Bible we need to see a God in the Bible actually that tells us things that we don't like about ourselves and maybe even sometimes tells us things that we don't like to hear about God. One of the marks then of conversion of being a person who's been changed by God is that you're willing to come to the Bible, the place that God has revealed himself and let the word actually confront you instead of you confronting and judging it. You see that's one of the ways that you know that you're encountering a real God, a God that's truly revealed himself as he is because that's the second element. The third element, third of four, not only is conversion a crash encounter with the light, the truth, it's entering into darkness. It's being plunged into darkness. Now there are two aspects here to that idea and the first is this, he's encountered by the light, Saul is, and then all of a sudden out of the light there's a voice, the light speaks, right, and the light says, Saul why are you persecuting me? And this question is exactly the question that Saul did not expect in any way, shape or form. This is the total opposite of what he thought he was going to hear from God. It's the exact opposite because when he hears this God say, Saul why are you persecuting me? What that means is that God is identifying so much with the people that Saul had been attacking that the total

opposite of what was happening is the case in Saul's mind. In other words, Saul thought that he was on the hunt to destroy the enemies of God, you see, and when he's approached by the divine light and the divine light says to him, why are you persecuting me? He realizes that God is so identified with the people he's been trying to slaughter that he's actually the enemy of God. You see, it's complete reversal. He's, in other words, in that moment he's plunging into darkness and that darkness is that he's wrestling, he's having, he's being told, you thought you were a good person, you thought you were doing the work of the Lord and actually you are the enemy of God. You're the sinner, you're the one that said enmity with God, you're the one that's in deep rebellion. In other words, he's realizing I am the guy who slaughters the people that God has declared to be good. I'm an enemy of God.

So this is the first way that you plunge into darkness in conversion, but the second, there's a second aspect and it's not simply that Saul crashes into the light and it plunges him into the darkness of who he is as a sinner, as an enemy of God. It's that it not only envelopes the spiritual darkness, but that the light literally makes him blind. Okay, so you see that in verse 8, the light literally causes him to be blind and it doesn't just cause him to be blind, but it says in verse 8 and 9 that he did not take food or water for three days. He fasted, in other words. Now a lot of people will look at this passage and they'll say that when Saul goes into this three-day fast, this is him responding to God. He's been encountered by the divine light and now he's responding to the divine light out of reverence. He would have fasted thousands of times in Judaism. They fasted every single week, in fact, and he's just responding faithfully to the God that's revealed himself. Actually though, I think that that's a bit of a thin way of looking at what's happening here. You see, the accent in the passage is completely on the passive. It's not at all about what Saul does. It's completely about everything that's happening to Saul. He was blinded. He was encountered by the light. In other words, he's being forced. He's being forced into a fast. He's being forced into a situation where he can't eat or drink, into a situation of lifelessness. In verse 8, after he's made blind, after he can't see anything, the text says that the only way that he could get to Damascus was by somebody holding his hand. In other words, just remember what Jesus said in Matthew 18, if you want to be a citizen of the kingdom of God, you must be converted and you must become like a helpless child. The only way that Saul could possibly get to Damascus was to have his hand held, like a little child. He had to be led down the road to

Damascus. He had to be treated like a child. So, I think a thicker way of looking at what's happening to him is this. Saul's view of the Messiah was that the Messiah was going to be strong. The Messiah that had been promised in the Old Testament was going to be a conqueror, was going to be somebody who came into Jerusalem, conquered the Roman Empire, and re-established Israel as the true people of God, the center of the nations in the Promised Land. And the people that were going to be vindicated and pronounced just in that moment when the strong Messiah came were the people that observed the law, that obeyed the Torah, Genesis Deuteronomy, that followed every aspect of the law, every jot and tittle. That's his view of the Messiah. And so, when Jesus Christ comes to the world, when Jesus Christ comes in the world, he literally is the total opposite of what Saul thought the Messiah was going to look like. I mean, he doesn't look anything like what Saul thinks a Messiah should look like. He's not strong at all. He manifests himself in total weakness. And even more than that, Saul, knowing his Torah, Genesis to Deuteronomy really well, he would have constantly reflected on Deuteronomy chapter 21 verse 13. And

[22 : 15] Deuteronomy chapter 21 verse 13, it says that anybody who hangs on a tree is a man that is cursed. Anybody who hangs on a tree is a man that's cursed. In other words, Saul's picture of the Messiah or the claim of the way that Jesus would have been the Messiah would be, no way, this man has been cursed. And nobody that claims to be the Messiah would be cursed by God. That's a weakness. That's not strength. That's not who the Messiah could possibly be. But then, on the road to Damascus, the light encounters him. My podium's falling. And the light says, I am Jesus, the one who you're persecuting. And when the light encounters him, it leaves him in utter darkness, completely blinded. Not only does the light leave him in utter darkness, it throws him into a condition of lifelessness. He cannot eat. He cannot drink. And for how long did you catch it?

How long? Three days, you see? Three days. Three days of blindness. Three days of being plunged into the darkness. Three days of lifelessness with no food, with no water. In other words, Saul encounters the light that is Jesus Christ. And what happens? Jesus throws him into a three-day-long grave. It's completely passive. He can't help it. He can't eat. He can't drink. He's

lifeless. He's helpless. He's blind. He's in darkness. And it's Jesus that threw him into that grave. Why? Why? Why is it that Christ does this to him? Why does Jesus do this to him? And I think it's this. So Saul could look at his body. He could look at his own physical condition in that three-day grave. And he could see that his identity was now completely wrapped up into the man that went into the grave for three days for him. You see, he doesn't need to go any farther but to look at his own physical condition to realize that the man that went into the grave for three days, the man he put in the grave that he helped send to the grave in Jerusalem, is identifying with him. And he with Jesus, he's reliving Christ's experience in order to show him that he is now one with the man that he crucified. You see, in other words, Saul had always thought that by the work of the law he would be justified before God. And as soon as God encounters him in the light, the only thing that Saul's good works got him was death, was being thrown down into the pit, into the grave, into the condition of lifelessness. And you know, you can only imagine that in those three days he's blind, he can't eat, he can't drink anything, he would have had an immense amount of time simply to think.

To think about what his body was like and what the man on the cross in the grave was like. You know, he knew the Old Testament backwards and forwards. He would have gone back to the Old Testament in his mind and thought about Isaiah's suffering servant songs, about the man that was crushed, about the promise of the one who would be bruised and broken for our iniquities. He would have gone back to Leviticus and thought about the sacrificial system and realized the blood of bulls and goats can't possibly save us. Right? He would have gone back in his mind and reread the entire Old Testament because he had heard it preached that way by Stephen and woken up to one idea. It wasn't simply that this Messiah was cursed and put on a tree because he was weak. The Messiah was put, was cursed and put on a tree because he chose to be. And substitution. You see, this is the moment where Saul is awakening to the idea of substitution. In other words, he would have said something like this, Jesus chose to die for me not because he's a weak Messiah, but because of a radical substitutionary love. The meeting of divine justice and divine mercy, the great exchange, him for me, me for him. And his own physical body in a three-day grave would have pointed him nowhere else. You see? In other words, the third element, conversion. Conversion is where God says to you, your identity is completely wrapped up in Jesus' identity. What's true of him has now become true of you. That's what's happening to you in conversion. In other words, the outward change is something like this. You know that a mark of conversion, you don't simply say, Jesus died on the cross, I believe that. You say something more like, I crucified him. It's when it becomes personal. I crucified him. He was for me, and I was with him. So that's the third element. Now, fourthly and finally, and very briefly, not only is conversion a crash encounter with the light, not only is it plunging down into the depths of darkness, but it's a transformation.

[27 : 31] And this one's really simple. Down in verse 18, it says that his scales fall off of his eyes physically. He regains life. He takes food. He drinks water. He's baptized. In other words, the image that we're being given is he's coming back from the dead. You see? He went into a three-day grave, and now he's regaining life again. And in verse 20, which is one verse beyond what we read this morning, it says that he goes into the synagogue, and he only says one thing. Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Now, this is a radical transformation. John Calvin puts it like this, the rabid wolf has now become the great sheep. The rabid wolf has now become the great sheep. This is the transformation. You see, it's a resurrection. His physical body has come back to life, but the point is that inwardly his spirit has been completely resurrected in Christ by sharing with Christ. In other words, one of the marks of conversion, you change your mind about Jesus, and Jesus changes your heart about Jesus. You love him.

It's that simple, really. You love him. And not only is it an outward transformation, but it includes an embrace. So we haven't really looked at this section of the passage, but Ananias, Ananias in verse 13, he's in Damascus, and he's called by God. And God basically says, I want you to go see Saul. He's going to be my apostle to the Gentiles. And his basic response is, whoa, whoa, wait a minute. This guy is the guy that's come to kill me. There's no way I can go to him and do what you're asking. He's come to kill me, but he goes anyway. And when he goes, the thing that he says to Saul, one word, he says, brother, brother.

And the reason he says this is because in that little word that he utters, what Ananias says of Paul, he calls him brother, it's true because it means that God has embraced him as a son. And that

means the community of the church has embraced him as a brother, that he is now the brother of many brothers and sisters, that he's the brother of Christ, that he's the son. Why? Because the gospel says that no matter what you've done, no matter what you've done in the past, when Jesus becomes your Messiah, when Christ changes you, you're adopted into the family. And so here's conversion. Here's the elements of conversion from this passage. You crash into the true God. You plunge into the darkness of your own sin. You enter into the darkness of Christ's death for you and you come out transformed, resurrected from the inside out. Those are the elements of conversion. And so just to close, there's no citizen of the kingdom of God, Jesus says, that is not converted. That has not changed from the inside out. There's not a single person that is a citizen of the kingdom of God that is not converted,

Matthew 18.3. So that means the question is obvious. Are you converted? Are you a citizen of the kingdom of God? And if God does the work, how can you be? If it's God that's truly the agent, the actor. And just a brief couple things here.

First, there are clear marks in the Bible that give you ways to know assurances that you are a child of God. This has happened to you and here's a couple of them. Do you have intimacy at all with God the Father? Do you have any intimacy with God at all? Do you desire God at all? And even when you feel like Jesus is absent from you, does that make you sad? Do you want him back? These are marks that this has happened to you, that you've been converted by God.

[31 : 57] But there are also actions with conversion, outward actions. You say, how can I be converted? If you're saying that it's God that does all the work, Peter puts it this way in a sermon in Acts 2, you crucified Jesus Christ because of your sin. Now repent and believe. And here's the promise, if you repent, if you confess Jesus Christ as Lord, you will be saved. That's the promise. At the very same time as it's completely true that you cannot be saved unless God does the work on you at the, at simultaneously, he says, but repent and believe on Christ and you will be saved. You see? And both are true at the very same time. Repentance, repentance is when you acknowledge that you don't have the resources within yourself to be justified by God, to be righteous before him, that you don't have those resources. And so it's simply turning to something outside yourself, the cross. It's like a weary traveler coming to the end of their journey and they're so tired that they simply fling their arms over someone else saying, just hold me up. That's the image of faith. It's entering into rest.

And that's what you're called to. That's conversion. So conversion to the light, the true light, that's what human beings need because it addresses the biggest problem in all of our lives. And we'll just close with this. In 1962, there was only been two theologians in all of history that have made the cover of Time Magazine. The first one was in 1962 and it was a guy named Karl Barth. He's a bit of a controversial German theologian, but on the cover of Time Magazine, they printed one of his quotes and this is what he said, the goal of humanity is not death but resurrection. That's simple. The goal of humanity is not death but resurrection. Every human being's ultimate problem is death and it's a death that they deserve because of their sin. And the greatest need above all else in life is resurrection. You need resurrection more than you need anything else in this world. And it has been offered and it has been purchased and there is a way and it can be yours. Repent and believe. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you did not leave us to ourselves but that you gave us a way to be changed and so we ask that you would break our hearts and show us repentance and faith. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.