

The Effect of the Mission: Paul's Conversion

BIG IDEA–Jesus graciously and miraculously transforms those he calls to carry on his mission

1. Intro

- Our theme this morning is conversion
- In particular I want us to see this morning, how Jesus graciously and miraculously transforms those he calls to carry on his mission

- At C@P we live to be and make disciples of Jesus
- And if we're taking that seriously, then we ought to see, under God ... people converted ...
 - That is ... we hope and pray that people will come to repent and believe in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins for eternal life
- If you're visiting ... and not yet a Christian ... that's our prayer for you
 - We're unashamed about that

- But as we were saying last week ... that's not easy
 - Our culture is hostile to the gospel
 - Lots of people are just not interested in hearing it
 - For many, it's a daunting task of sharing the gospel

- Well Acts 9 is a great antidote for this
- Because as we look at this chapter ... we see the conversion of a man who was more hostile to Jesus than any other person in history
- And as we do ... I pray
 - Not only will you be humbled, comforted, encouraged and challenged ...
 - We will also see what real conversion looks like
 - That's important whether you're a believer or unbeliever ...
 - Because as we do ... you and I will be forced to reflect on our faith ... wherever we are at

- This morning I want to look at the passage under three headings ...
 - Miracle of Conversion – how did it happen?
 - Motive of Conversion – why did it happen?
 - Marks of Conversion – what changed when it happened?

2. Context

- After he rose from the dead Jesus commissioned his disciples to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth
 - Stage 1 > Jerusalem

- Stage 2 > Judea & Samaria
 - We've seen this over the last two weeks
 - Stoning of Stephen (Ch 7) led to the persecution of Christians who were forced them to flee from Jerusalem out into the regions of Judea and Samaria
 - As they went they proclaimed the gospel
 - Last week we saw a particular example of that with Philip sharing the gospel with the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch
- In Ch 9, the camera now pans back from Samaria to Jerusalem to focus on man called Saul who God would call and use to change the world
- Because what we see in this chapter is
 - God taking the greatest persecutor of Christianity and the church ...
 - And raising him up to be God's instrument to lead stage 3 of the mission and take the gospel to the Gentiles
 - And within 30 years kick started the greatest cultural transformation the world has ever seen

3. Miracle of Conversion – how did it happen?

- We've already encountered Saul earlier in Acts
 - He was there at the stoning of Stephen ... looking after the coats of those who were executing Stephen giving approval of his death
- By the time we get back to 9:1 ... Saul has gone from being approving onlooker ... to chief persecutor and protagonist
 - *Acts 9:1-2* *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.*¹
- It's hard to imagine anyone more against Jesus and his followers than Saul
 - Saul was completely hostile to the gospel and to the church
 - So much so he was willing to travel to other cities to find Christians and to bring them home for punishment
 - So his opposition to the gospel was fanatical
- Which makes his conversion that much more remarkable!

¹ Acts 26:9-11 ⁹ "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

- How do you take someone who is the arch enemy of Christianity, the Church and Jesus ... to turn around and say
 - "I want to be baptized"
 - "I want join the church"
 - "I want to tell other people about Jesus"
 - "I want to associate with all the people I've been attacking"
 - "I'd like to lay my life on the line forever"
- How do you get a person to change like that?

- It would be like a radical Islamic Imam getting converted and
 - Wanting to burn all his books
 - Turn his back on Islam
 - Travel to India as a missionary and teach the gospel ... at great cost and deprivation to himself
- What would it take for this to happen?

- The answer of course is a miracle
- How does that happen?
 - Totally by grace
 - That is, it's nothing Saul does ...
 - It's totally the work of Jesus - through the HS, that brings about his transformation

- The Bible makes it very clear² ... you and I don't 'seek' God, unless God first comes and seeks us³

- And that cannot be more evident than in Saul
- Because despite the fact that he was fanatically against Jesus ... Christ shows him mercy
- Even though Saul was a wolf attacking the sheep
 - Christ in his grace ... would call him and use him to be a shepherd who would lead, care for and love Christ's sheep

- Paul himself acknowledges this in Ephesians 3:8
 - *Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ*

² In John 6:44 Jesus said "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him And in John 15:16 Jesus says to his disciples "you have not chosen me, but I have chosen you ..."

³ "No one seeks God" (Rom3:11)

- **Application**

- The grace of God ... shown to us in Christ, applied to us by the HS ... is how God works in all people
 - No-one comes to faith in Jesus Christ ... apart from his grace
 - No-one seeks God of their own accord ... apart from God graciously taking the scales of our eyes and helping us to see
- Which is tremendously humbling and wonderfully comforting
- It's humbling because you and I have nothing to boast in before God in becoming a Christian
 - Jesus doesn't look at you and say ... I'm choosing you because
 - You're a good person
 - You're a good parent
 - You're generous person
 - You've got potential
 - You've got good principles
 - We've got nothing! That's humbling!
- And also it's comforting ... particularly for the person who is aware of their failings and brokenness ...
- Why? Because it doesn't depend on you ... it only depends on Christ
- The world determines who are the winners in life by
 - How rich you are
 - How beautiful you are
 - How successful you are
 - How together you are
 - If you tick those boxes ... our culture says you've made it
 - But if you don't ... our culture says you're a failure
- But that's not how it works with Christ
 - You're not chosen because of
 - how rich, beautiful, successful or together you are
 - how religious or moral you are
 - You're are chosen by grace
 - And that is such a comforting thing
- But the wonder of God's grace is also challenging and encouraging for us
- Because if Saul can be converted ... then **anyone** can!
 - If God can turn the heart of a man like Saul ... then he can turn the heart of anyone
 - No-one is beyond the grace and forgiveness of Jesus

- His death on the cross is sufficient to cover over all sin
- Which means ...
 - It doesn't matter
 - how bad you've been
 - what sins you're struggling with
 - how much hurt you've caused
 - God's grace is always sufficient
- Which is great news for the person who is sitting here today and wondering
 - Could I ever be forgiven?
 - Could I ever be accepted by God?
 - Could I ever have eternal life?
- The answer is ... unequivocally ... yes!
 - NO-ONE is beyond the grace and forgiveness of God
- And if no-one is beyond the grace and forgiveness God ...
- Then that means the gospel is worth sharing with everyone... because you just don't know who God is going to call
 - It's easy to think that some people are more likely to respond to the gospel ... and others just seem so far away that they would never become a Christian
- But what God does in and through Saul shows us, that as a Christian, you can't think in terms of
 - people who are 'likely' to become Christians
 - versus others who are 'unlikely'
- You are many people who seem wild, hostile, and far from Christ ...
 - And it's very easy to think that there's no point talking to them about Jesus
 - Yet God in his grace works for them to hear the gospel and they're converted
- There are just as many people who are upright, sensible, and moral ...
 - And we think ... 'they'd be a good Christian' ... and yet they hear the gospel and remain hard-hearted to Jesus
- Why? Because it takes a miracle of grace for a person to be saved

4. Motive of Conversion – why did it happen?

- That's the miracle of the conversion
- What's the motive of the conversion – why did it happen?

- As God does for every believer, God had very clear purpose for Paul
- And God's purpose in calling Paul ... was to be his apostle to the Gentiles
 - *v15 - This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.*

- Who would have picked it?
 - Paul was a Pharisee (Jewish religious elite)
 - He hated Christians
 - He hated Jesus and all that he stood for
- Yet ... as a Pharisee Paul knew his OT scriptures like back of his hand
- In addition, we're told he came from Tarsus which is in modern day Turkey
 - In Jesus time that was part of the Roman Empire but like most of the RE was still very much Greek in culture
- Therefore, Paul knew both Jewish and Greek culture and language
- Therefore, he was the perfect man to be God's chosen instrument to take the gospel to the nations ...
- Because from Antioch Paul would embark on numerous missionary journeys that would see
 - many, many men and women come to faith,
 - churches planted, and
 - leaders trained
 - that would become the foundation of the gospel going out to all the world and eventually into the ears of people like you and me

- **Application**
- In many ways, Paul was and is unique amongst Christians
- There will only ever be ... one Apostle to the Gentiles
- But ... everyone has a purpose within the kingdom of God
- When Paul was writing to the believers in Ephesus he said
 - ⁸ *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--* ⁹ *not by works, so that no one can boast.* ¹⁰ *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* - Ephesians 2:8-10

- You see God calls everyone by grace ... and he calls them with purpose

- You see v10?
- FOR ... we were created to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do
- If you're a Christian person here this morning, know that God has called you to himself and into his eternal kingdom ... to do good works he has specifically prepared you to do!
 - Isn't that incredible!
 - Everyone has a purpose > everyone has something to do
- Paul's purpose was to be the apostle to the Gentiles
- The question is ... what's purpose has God called you to?
 - What 'good works' has God prepared in advance for you to do?

- In the general sense, he has called every Christians to live to be and make disciples of Jesus
 - That's true for all believers ... and that's why it's our mission here at C@P
 - Whether you're being a witness for Jesus
 - School
 - Uni
 - Work
 - Local sporting club
 - Neighbours
 - Friends and family
 - Everyone of us has that mission purpose
- It may not be as grand as Billy Graham, or Hudson Taylor or Apostle Paul
 - But there will be people that God has placed in your life around you that you are best to reach
 - Who are they?
 - What can you do, with the help and power of the Holy Spirit, to be a witness to them?

- But then every Christian will all have ways they can serve Jesus and his kingdom that are unique to them

- Where do you think God is leading you to serve him and his kingdom
 - Generosity
 - Hospitality
 - Teaching children
 - Discipling adults
 - Music

- Pastoral care
- Leadership
- Administration
- God, who knows you intimately ...
 - Has given you gifts
 - Knows your temperament
 - Knows your connections
 - Knows your circumstances
 - Has prepared good works in advance for you to do
- In effect, your conversion, like Paul ... is your commissioning to get on with doing those good works
- That's the motive for conversion - for you and I are called with a purpose

5. Marks of Conversion – what changed when it happened?

- Now every conversion is different and very few people are going to have a Damascus Road experience of bright lights and voices from heaven
- However, there are certain marks of Paul's conversion that ought to be true for every real believer
- So I want to ask you whether these four marks in the Apostle Paul are present in you

Submission to the Lordship of Christ

- First mark that is true for every Christian, every real believer is ... a submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ
 - Without recognising that Jesus Christ sits on the throne of heaven and is the Lord God
 - Without recognising that Jesus Christ is the only true saviour
 - it is **impossible** to be a Christian
- The Apostle Paul's encounter with Christ totally shifted his understanding of who Jesus is and how he must now relate to him
 - Before he hated Jesus, now he serves Jesus
 - Before he persecuted Christ, now he defends and proclaims Christ
 - Before Christ was a blasphemy, now he is Lord of heaven and earth
- The person who says they believe in God ... but has no place for Jesus Christ ... is not a Christian

- For Jesus says in John 14:6 ... *I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me*
- You cannot be a follower of Christ unless you recognise Jesus Christ is the way to the Father

- Likewise, the person who refuses to submit to the Lordship of Jesus is not a Christian either
- It's one thing to say you believe ... but it's another thing to live out that belief
- There are many people who will say they're a Christian ... say they trust in Jesus ... but when it comes to what Jesus has to say about
 - Money
 - Sexuality
 - Repentance
 - Judgment
- They're just unwilling to submit to the Lordship of Jesus
- Such a person is not converted

- First mark of a believer is recognise Jesus is Lord, Jesus is saviour
 - Is that you?

Commitment to the people of Christ

- Second mark of conversion is a commitment to the people of Christ
- Did you notice when Jesus confronts Paul on the Damascus Road he says
 - "Saul, why do you persecute me?"
- You could imagine Saul saying
 - "I don't know who you are, but I'm not attacking you, I'm just attacking Christians"
- And the Lord Jesus says
 - "No, if you attack Christians, you attack me, because Christians are my body"
- The believers in this world really are the body of Christ

- This chapter is absolutely full of references to Christians
- 13 times the passage speaks of Christians
 - 5 x Disciples
 - 1 x Those who belonged to the way
 - 1 x Saints
 - 2 x those who call on name of the Lord
 - 1 x Followers

- 1 x Brothers
- And notice how the Lord Jesus sends to Paul two believers – one in Damascus, one in Jerusalem, to help the Apostle Paul into the fellowship
 - It's a wonderful thing when a believer helps a visitor or a seeker into the fellowship and enables them to get established, cared for and respected
 - Never underestimate the importance and power of being a Christian friend to the person who is seeking to be part of the church
 - Ananias and Barnabas, they may not be famous ... but they are absolutely essential in God's purposes
- Real conversion is marked by a commitment to the people of Christ
- One commentator says
 - "I can refuse to have anything to do with the local bird watching association and still be a really good bird watcher ... but I cannot call on Christ and refuse his people – I cannot claim to love the Lord Jesus and refuse to love his saints"
- Mark of a real believer is
 - that you suddenly realise that Christ has called you into a family,
 - and that he has actually chosen people ...
 - not to be independent, but to
 - meet,
 - strengthen one another,
 - encourage one another,
 - love one another,
 - serve one another,
 - sing together,
 - work together,
 - witness together
- So the person who says in their head
 - "It's okay to come to church occasionally" ... that's not what Christ's called you to
 - "I don't like that church anymore because they said something that challenged me" ... that's not real Christianity
 - "We need to get away regularly on weekends" ... hasn't really understood what being a Christian is about

- Because a Christian is a person who knows they're greatly loved by Jesus Christ and that love has an impact and a transforming effect on their relationship with other believers
- It was real for Paul, I wonder if it is true for you

Willingness to give up all for Christ

- The third mark that is true for every real believer ... is a willingness to give up your life for Christ
- The Apostle Paul had a very respectable and comfortable life
 - He was a Pharisee which suggests he or his family had financial means
 - He had status
 - He was going places
 - He was making a name for himself
 - He was very middle class ...
- And yet he can say as he does in Philippians 3:8
 - *I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ*
- The mark of a believer is a willingness to give up your old life to follow Christ
- Jesus said even if you gained the **whole world!!** ... it doesn't compare to saving your soul and having eternal life
- Are you willing to let go ... in order to say
 - Lord I offer my soul, my life, my all ... for you and your kingdom
 - Because that's what following Jesus is all about

Desire to proclaim the truth of Christ

- The fourth and final mark you see in Paul and see in every real Christian is
 - A deep desire to proclaim the truth about Christ
- Once Paul was converted, immediately he began to tell people about Jesus
 - v20 Jesus is the Son of God
 - v22 Jesus is the Messiah
 - v28 speaking boldly in the name of the Lord
- The mark of a believer is a deep desire, like Paul, to share the truth of Jesus Christ
- Why?
 - Because as a believer, you know the only way a person can be saved from judgment for eternal life is by hearing and responding to the gospel

- No-one wants to get to the last day and stand before God with their sins not atoned for
- No-one wants face God's judgment with only their sins between them and God – that would be a terrible thing
- And therefore a disciple of Christ will have a desire to see people saved through Christ
- They'll want to see the truth about Jesus proclaimed in order for that to happen

6. Conclusion

- How are people converted?
 - It is a miracle of grace and
 - it ought to humble you and comfort you in your own conversion
 - it ought to challenge you and encourage in the conversion of others
- Why are people converted?
 - God calls every believer for a purpose
 - To live to be and make disciples
 - And to do the good works God prepared in advance for you to do
- What are the marks of conversion
 - Submission to the Lordship of Jesus
 - Commitment to the people of Jesus
 - Willingness to give up all for Jesus
 - Desire to proclaim the truth about Jesus

PRAY