

Acts 9 Sermon – God triumphs

Intro

Do you ever feel like it's a struggle for God to work in this world?

Maybe you feel like God and His church are on the ropes in our culture. Under a month ago, a 71-year-old Christian street preacher was arrested for preaching the biblical meaning of marriage, that marriage is between one man and one woman. As he was led away by the police, people shouted "This is a Christian country". In a Christian country, preachers are being put in handcuffs for proclaiming what the Bible says. Surely in the face of this opposition, as young people increasingly hate the Christian message, the church is going to die out. Doesn't it feel like God is struggling?

Well God is not struggling. God triumphs. If you've ever read any of those huge book franchises, like Harry Potter, or Lord of the Rings, or Narnia, or seen films like Star Wars, you'll see that the battle between good and evil is closely fought, and sometimes the good guys seem like they're going to lose. Because that's what makes a good story – that tension, the feeling that all might be lost.

In this sense the story of God growing the church is not a good story, because it's so one-sided. And we see that through the book of Acts, no matter how hard people try to stop the church growing, God triumphs. And our passage today is possibly the best example of that, as we see how Saul, the great persecutor of the Church, becomes not only a Christian, but Jesus' apostle to the Gentiles. There's really only one big thing here and it's this – God triumphs!

We're going to look at Saul this morning and three things that happen to him, all of which are acts of God. And the first thing is that Saul is stopped

1) Saul is stopped (v1-9)

Let me read from verse 1. "Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" I love that description, he's like a dragon prowling around threatening Christians. "He went to the high priest 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." This guy *hates* Christians, he wants them in prison, he gets legal permission to put them in handcuffs and take them back to Jerusalem, probably because there would be legal cause there for him to execute them, like they did with Stephen.

It's worth saying too that Saul isn't just personally opposed to Christians, they're not just people who've rubbed him up the wrong way. Saul is convinced that these Christians are drawing people away from true worship of the one true God. He's a Jew, a Hebrew, who wants God to be honoured, and he thinks that the followers of Jesus have got it all wrong, and are worshipping a mere human, giving up on Judaism. It's easy to paint him as a pantomime villain, but we can relate to his motivation here!

But anyway, here he is, a man on a mission against Christians. And v3 "as he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting".

Uh oh... Thinks Saul... I thought Jesus was dead. I was against these Christians because I thought they'd got it wrong... And Jesus is alive... That means maybe these Christians got it right!

This is a huge moment in the book of Acts, Jesus has been mentioned on almost every page, but he's been in the background for most of it, now he takes centre stage. The director, the orchestrator, the one in control of the whole story, steps out from behind the camera, grabs Saul by the lapels and says "Stop right there."

It's interesting too that Jesus identifies with His people. We might read what Jesus says and be a bit confused, because Saul was persecuting *the church*, and Jesus says "Why are you persecuting *me*?", but what's happening is Jesus is saying that He is personally affected by what happens to the Church. It's His church, His body. Isn't that a huge encouragement? Jesus isn't going to sit idly by and watch as preachers are arrested, as the church suffers here in the UK or further afield. No, because whatever happens to the Church happens to Jesus too, the head of the Church. So Jesus, God incarnate, God the Son, is intimately involved in making sure His church survives. And He triumphs.

This persecutor, this nuclear weapon ready to go and ravage the church by arresting Christians is stopped in his tracks. And there's no struggle. God hasn't pressed a big red panic button. It's effortless. Granted, Jesus does appear in a flash of lightning, it's by no means unimpressive but it doesn't seem like it's in any way a challenge for Him. Saul and his mission against Christians don't take any ground whatsoever. With a few words of caution, God triumphs. He is fully, totally in control.

We've seen this already in this section of Acts – it may have looked like God had been defeated when Stephen was killed, but chapter 8 verse 1 "A great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered... Those who were scattered preached the word wherever they went." This is something that looks like a defeat for God, but it's a victory – God triumphs!

This is so clearly his intervention. Saul was so determined to arrest Christians, he wouldn't have been turned around by anything other than divine intervention, and that's exactly what happens. No contest. Saul is stopped, God triumphs.

2) Saul is converted (v10-19)

But wait! It gets even better, because Saul is not only stopped but He is also converted. Not only does God triumph over His enemy, he turns his enemy around and uses him for His purposes. This is an amazing story of an amazing conversion. God would be shown as triumphant if he'd struck Saul down with fire from heaven. And he could have done that, but I actually think it shows us how wonderful God's victory is that He turns Saul's life around.

God's triumphant victory isn't one purely of strength and power, but it is one of grace. God finds the most hateful, vicious enemy of his people, and says "I want to forgive you, I want to show my love to you." As Jesus died on the cross, He was dying for Saul the persecutor who watched on smiling as Stephen was executed. Later on in his life, when he's writing his first letter to Timothy, Saul, now called Paul, reflects on this himself – "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst". He knows what a big deal it was for Jesus to die for him, he knows his sin. And God triumphs not only by stopping Paul, but by saving him, by converting him.

It is so clearly God who is the main mover and shaker as Saul is converted. It's not the case that Saul is wandering along the road to Damascus and suddenly realises, "Oh, actually, Jesus really was the Messiah!" No, Jesus reveals Himself to Saul. Saul doesn't find God, God finds Saul. Throughout Acts we see that people become Christians because of the agency of God. Remember the Ethiopian – God saw him reading Isaiah the prophet and sent Philip to speak to him. God brought him to know Jesus.

God triumphs over the hard hearts of people, because He works to change their hearts to bring them to know Him and to trust Him.

Furthermore, God used not only the miraculous, but also the ordinary to bring Saul to know Him. He works through the flash of lightning and the audible voice of Jesus, but also the presence of Ananias, the ordinary Christian believer who welcomes Saul into the church. Think about this, think about how scared Ananias would have been in approaching this great persecutor to bring Him into the family of God!

Jesus has dealt with Saul on the road, and now hops over to Damascus to talk to Ananias. It's also Jesus here, as Ananias tells Saul in verse 17. Jesus appears to Ananias and tells him to go find Saul because he is praying. And Ananias thinks "Are you having a laugh? Saul?!? I'm not going to see Saul, he'll tie me up and take me to Jerusalem." He says, verse 13 "Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name" Jesus, are you sure this is a good idea?

"But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go!"". Just as Jesus stepped in to stop Saul getting to Damascus, He steps in to get Ananias to go to Saul. And then Jesus says something remarkable "This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel." *THIS MAN??* Really?? It must have been terrifying for Ananias, but he trusted God, and courageously went to speak to Saul. This ordinary Christian, who we never hear about outside of this story, is instrumental in God's triumphant master plan. Praise God for Ananias!

How wonderful then must it have been for Saul as the first words he heard as a Christian were words of brotherly welcome. Look down with me at verse 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". What a wonderful welcome! God's triumph in Saul's life is complete. He's now welcomed into the Church, he's baptised in v18, he is Ananias's brother. Now some members of the church take a bit of convincing that Saul is no longer a persecutor, but the deed is done. He has become a true believer in Jesus. Doesn't this amaze us at God's power! We have a mighty, triumphant God, who not only stopped the persecution, but worked in the heart of the persecutor, and offered Him grace.

3. Saul is sent! (v20-31)

And so story over – God's triumphantly stopped a persecutor and brought him to believe in Jesus. On to the next conversion.

But, no, that's not what happens. It gets even better, because Saul is not only stopped and converted, he's also sent. And he's not only sent to be one of many evangelists, he's given a central, crucial role in being the apostle to the Gentiles, the one who is fundamental in God's plan to bring all nations to himself. The one who eventually writes nearly half the books that are now in our New Testament. If you've been a Christian for a while, you'll know how big a deal Paul, formerly Saul, is!

And something I've learnt when studying this passage is that it's actually quite significant the way Jesus speaks to Saul, He says "Saul, Saul". I'd be tempted to gloss over that, because it just seems like a turn of phrase, but I read in a commentary that it's actually really quite rare for someone to be called by name twice. And in the original text, Luke draws attention to it by writing Saul's name

differently. In the narration he's called Saulos, but in Jesus' words he's called Saoul, which is the Aramaic version. There's something going on with the calling here, and I think it's quite cool.

The only other times in the Bible when God speaks from heaven and says their name twice is with Abraham, Moses and Samuel – all people who God used for really big things. This doesn't happen with other conversions in the book of Acts. God doesn't call the believers in Samaria by name, He doesn't do it with the Ethiopian, or Cornelius later on. All this goes to show how Saul is a special case, his conversion is unique.

Like Abraham, Moses, and Samuel, Saul is given a special job as apostle to the gentiles, so this is a special conversion. God doesn't only stop Saul, God doesn't only convert him to be a Christian, he takes him, turns him around and makes him instrumental in his plans. He says this to Ananias too, saying Saul is going to be an apostle. Given the same authority as one of the twelve. Saul, later Paul, is given special authority. That's why his sermons go into the Bible, and our sermons should come out of it.

In Life Groups this week we're going to look a little at the implications of this passage for our own evangelism, so I won't go into that too much here, mainly because I think Luke's main point in telling us this story is to show us God's triumph and power. But I will say that we shouldn't take Saul's conversion as a pattern for all conversions, because He is a key part of God's plan to the gentiles. John Stott puts it in quite an entertaining way - "It is not necessary for us to be struck by divine lightning, or fall to the ground or hear our name called out in Aramaic, any more than it is necessary to travel to precisely the same place outside Damascus."

This book [Out of the Black Shadows] contains a story of a persecutor becoming a Christian, sort of a modern-day Saul, but for him there's no audible voice of Jesus or flash of lighting, he simply sits in a Christian meeting and hears the word of God preached. That is the common way people become Christians these days, that's what we should expect. And that is no less the work of God than Saul on the Damascus road.

And in verses 20-31 we see the first steps Saul takes in his ministry. It's remarkable how God uses him, immediately he starts preaching, logically debating with people that Jesus is the Messiah. Verse 20 "At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. 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?" Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah." This man who was so zealous in his persecution of Christians takes that same full-on passion and drives it into convincing people of the truth of the gospel. He was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, but when he arrives, he is doing the opposite, convincing Jews to become Christians!

He's also willing to be persecuted himself for what he's doing – in these few verses, he is the subject of two assassination attempts – verse 23 "after many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him" and verse 29 "He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him" Give the man a break! But Saul is not swayed by this. And if we read this passage knowing the rest of Acts, we'll know this is not the end of his struggles. He's beaten and left for dead, arrested multiple times, shipwrecked and put on trial – all for preaching that Jesus is the Messiah.

This should make us amazed at Saul/Paul yes, but it should make us even more amazed at God, the sovereign, triumphant Lord, who stopped the persecutor, converted him, and then used him for his purposes by sending him out to preach in the face of suffering.

So what?

So what? What does this mean for us? Well I think every Bible passage can be applied to three areas of our lives – our head, our heart and our hands. What we think, what we feel and what we do.

Head

God triumphs, so know and believe that He is in control, that He can save absolutely anyone. Who's the person you think is least likely to become a Christian? Your gay, trans friend, the LGBT activist? Your Dad who openly makes fun of Christians? Your neighbour who just doesn't care? Maybe even you? Well if God can save Saul, the man hellbent on killing Christians, He can save anyone. Believe it, believe he's in control.

Heart

God triumphs, so rejoice in His grace and mercy, turning lives around, bringing people to repentance. If you're a Christian, thank God that he triumphed over your hard heart and your sin, that He graciously and powerfully worked in your life to bring you to repentance, and rejoice.

Hands

God triumphs, so get on board with his master plan! He's saved us like He saved Saul, and He wants us to be part of His mission too. Go and prove that Jesus is the Messiah, expect persecution too, but get involved, trusting that our triumphant God is with us. We're going to look at this a bit more in Life Groups, this week, so make sure you get along to that, but for now, let me pray.