

Acts 9:1-22

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[0 : 00] Well, the big film blockbuster of this Christmas is likely to be The Hobbit. Some of you have seen it advertised already, following on from the trilogy of The Lord of the Rings, which was on for three Christmases and which I took Hannah to see and Janet stayed at home because you won't watch anything with goblins in it.

So The Hobbit is coming out and interestingly, I've been reading in one or two magazines recently, it always seems to come out when something like this comes. What is the greatest story? Where do we find the greatest narratives?

And, you know, people have been arguing, you know, whether The Hobbit's better than Lord of the Rings and whether any of them are better than The Chronicles of Narnia and so on.

But, you know, in our Bibles, we have the greatest narratives of all.

And, of course, what is even greater about them than any of the other things that I mentioned is that they are true narratives. They are events that actually happen.

[1 : 12] And sometimes the danger is we become so familiar with them that we forget what tremendous narratives they are.

Let me just remind you of a few of them as we begin this morning. One of the great narratives of the Old Testament is the crossing of the Red Sea.

It's the nation of Israel being brought out of captivity in Egypt and eventually coming into the Promised Land and coming into safety and coming into freedom.

And for Jewish people, that is still the great event in history. As they celebrate their Passover, they remember that event.

And as Christian believers, we remember that event as well, but we can also look forward to seeing how that is a picture of Jesus rescuing us from an even greater slavery.

[2 : 18] But just remember that event. They come out of Egypt. The Pharaoh at first says they can go. But he changes his mind.

He's going to lose his labor market, his cheap labor market. And so he sends his army after them, the most technologically advanced army of its day.

And there are the unprotected people of Israel with the sea in front of them and this army charging after them, seemingly in an impossible position.

And yet the Lord opened the way for them through the sea. Not only did he open a way whereby they could walk through on dry land, but he also caused the waters then to swamp their enemies.

And again, it's a tremendous historical event. But it's wonderful also, perhaps there are times in our lives when we feel we're in a hard place and everywhere we look before and behind us, there seems nothing but difficulties and oppression.

[3 : 36] And as we read that again, it reminds us that God is able to take us through the most difficult of circumstances.

Another one of my favorite narratives in the Old Testament is that case when the people of Israel were in captivity once more, this time in Babylon. And you have those friends of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who will not bow down and worship foreign gods.

And they are told that they are going to be thrown into this blast furnace, a furnace so hot that even the people who brought them near to it were burned up in its heat.

They were flung into that furnace. And yet they were kept safe. And indeed when people looked into it, they saw a fourth figure, which many people, myself included, think was a Christophany.

In other words, an early appearance of the Son of God. But I love their faith, these men. Their faith didn't depend on their rescue.

[4 : 52] They said God is able to take us out of that situation if he chooses to do so. But even if he does not, still we will not bow down and worship your foreign gods.

Great narratives. And you come into the New Testament there from your notices. I gather many of the members here are reading through Luke's Gospel. And you cannot turn a page of Luke's Gospel without being confronted by remarkable narratives in the life of Jesus.

Remarkable healings. Remarkable power over nature. I love the account of Jesus stilling the storm. You remember, they're out on that boat.

And here are hardened fishermen. Those who knew that Sea of Galilee inside out. And such was the ferocity of that storm that they were frightened.

And they thought that their end had come. But Jesus spoke. And he stilled the storm with a word.

[6 : 09] And these fishermen were staggered. Who is this? Who can speak? And the storms are still.

But the most remarkable narrative of all is that of the death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

There has never been anything like this before. There will never be anything like this again. The Lord Jesus is truly dead.

Those women go up to the tomb in order to do what they can to show their respect for him by taking the spices to embalm his body.

They get up there. They find the stone has been rolled away. They find these white angelic creatures who speak to them and say, he is not here, he is risen.

[7 : 14] They go back to tell the disciples, and I love the psychological truth of the scriptures. The disciples don't say, oh great, we expected that. They say, hmm, don't believe what you're saying.

They couldn't believe. They thought they were talking rubbish. And only later, Peter and probably John go to the tomb and check it out for themselves.

Great narratives. And these narratives continue into the book of Acts and we read another wonderful narrative.

We had it read for us a little earlier. This transformation, this conversion of the man called Saul.

We sometimes hear of U-turns in politics, don't we? But was there ever a U-turn like this? It would be greater than if the Taliban suddenly announced that they were sponsoring a conference on women's rights.

[8 : 19] It's a huge U-turn. Let's not forget what Saul was like. Barry pointed it out to us even as he read the passage.

How chapter nine begins. Saul was breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.

He was the man who had held the cloaks of those who had stoned Stephen to death. And now, he wasn't just content in arresting Christians within Jerusalem.

He got papers so that he could travel to go to other places where he heard there were followers of the way, as he called them, so that he could search them out, arrest them, and imprison them.

And yet, he meets with the Lord Jesus, of course, on his road to Damascus. And he is utterly transformed transformed.

[9 : 27] He is utterly turned around. We often stop the reading, don't we, at verse 19, but I ask Barry to go on for the next three or four verses to show that change.

There he is now in Damascus, having been changed, having been transformed, and he goes into the synagogues. And you can, can you imagine the reaction in the synagogues when people see Saul of Tarsus come?

Many of the Jewish people who were still opposed to Christianity would have been thinking, ah, here he is, they're going to get it now. Here's Saul, great intellect, if we let him stand and speak, he's going to really tell these followers of the way how wrong they are, and he's going to give at them with both barrels.

instead, Saul stands up there and proves from those scriptures that he knows so well that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Christ, the Messiah for whom they were waiting.

You can imagine the people in the synagogue, they're waiting for the punchline. You know, they're waiting for him to suddenly turn it on the head and say, oh, that's wrong. But no, he stayed there for some time in Damascus and preached the truth about Jesus.

[10 : 57] And even some of the followers of the way were a little bit wary, you know, such was this change. Is this a trick? Is he trying to root us out, find out who the supporters are?

Later when he went to Jerusalem, again, some people were very, very wary of him. So renowned, have been his opposition to the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is a tremendous narrative. And Paul would, as he later became known, would point out the significance of this.

When he was writing his first letter to his young follower, Timothy, later, he would say to him, here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst. That wasn't false modesty with him. He truly believed that.

[12 : 03] I was one who persecuted Jesus' followers. I was the worst of sinners. God says, says Paul, for that very reason, I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

He's saying, God used me as an example. That if that man can be changed, that if that man can be transformed, then anybody can.

And nobody sitting here this morning, I don't know if there's somebody here who's sitting this morning who's not yet a Christian, and you may have thoughts in your mind of your past life, of what you've done and said, God couldn't possibly forgive me if these good people in the pews knew what my inner life was really like, you wouldn't speak to me again.

I'm not doubting what you think, but I would say, look at Saul, that here is a man who could be forgiven, who could be transformed, and so can you.

And occasionally, we come across such dramatic conversions today. When we were in Bradford, there was somebody who was converted very, very dramatically when we were in the church there on Thorpe Edge.

[13 : 38] A young man who had been excluded from school when he was about 15, who was well known in the area, who, if he was ever anywhere near the church, it was to climb on the roof during the services to cause a commotion.

He was involved very much in the drug scene in Bradford and in witchcraft, quite seriously into it. one Saturday morning when he was in a state really of drug-fueled paranoia, he knelt down in what he later would realise was the middle of the road in a fog and cried out that if there was a God, he would make himself known to him in some way.

And he saw a light, a physical light. And what it was, in fact, it was the minister of that church going back into the church because he'd forgotten something.

And this young man went to him and poured out his heart to him. And over the period of that weekend, he was wonderfully converted.

And eventually he got his education back on track, he became a psychiatric nurse, worked in West Africa for a while, and he is now a pastor of the gospel.

[14 : 59] And when these things happen, it's wonderful, it's glorious for us to see that God is still the same God today, the God of Abraham and Jacob, and the God of Saul is the same God.

But, but, there can be a danger when we look at Saul's conversion and when we hear stories like this young man I mentioned in Bradford and perhaps you hear of the others, there is a danger that we stop and say, well, they are the only type of conversions that really count.

And somehow if it's not as dramatic as that, it's either not real or it's somehow or the other second class.

But what I want to stress this morning is that that is not the case. as somebody said to me very, very recently, every conversion is an absolute miracle.

And that's whether it happens in an instant with somebody or whether it happens over periods of weeks or months so the person couldn't actually name the day when they became a Christian.

[16 : 18] So what I want to do in the rest of our meeting this morning, I want to point out not the extraordinary things in Saul's conversion, but I want us to think a little bit this morning about those things in Saul's conversion that are common to every conversion, that are common to every person becoming a Christian.

the first thing I want to point out is what we looked at a little bit with the children, is that when Saul was turned around, when he was transformed, he began to see things again.

He saw things afresh. Now of course, Saul had a physical change of sight.

sight. He was made blind by God on the road to Damascus, and then Ananias was sent to him to lay his hands on him, and he saw again.

So there was a physical regaining of sight. But that was really a picture of what had happened to him spiritually.

[17 : 46] days before on that road to Damascus, when he had met with the Lord Jesus, that is when he began to see things again spiritually.

And in fact, he would use that as a picture, as a metaphor himself. Towards the end of his life, he was under house arrest in Rome, and he had the opportunity then to speak to some of the rulers of the day, to explain what had happened in his life, and to explain what his ministry was all about.

And he tells this story, this narrative in his own words, about how Jesus appeared to him, and Jesus said to him, I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles.

I am sending you to them to open their eyes. You see, Saul had had his physical eyes open, but he had also had the eyes of his heart open.

And the ministry that God gave to him was to go to the non-Jewish people, the Gentiles, to open their eyes.

[19 : 11] Obviously, they weren't physically blind, most of them, but they were spiritually blind, and he was sent to open their eyes.

Again, he used that same picture when he wrote to the church at Corinth, and he was explaining there why some people were believers and some were not.

And he says of those who are not believers, the God of this age, talking about Satan, the God of this age, has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.

He says, that's their situation. And I've come to preach the gospel to them that their eyes might be opened. So what sort of things might we see more clearly when our spiritual eyes are opened, when the Holy Spirit begins to work in our lives, begins to work in somebody's life?

Firstly, we begin to see God for who he truly is. God is. Now for some people of course, that may be that they come to see and to recognize that God is for the first time.

[20 : 40] There are some people who are wonderfully brought from a position of atheism, a position where they would say categorically there is no God, to a position where they come and say God is.

And there have been many people for whom that has happened. but for many people, I think what it is, is that their picture, their understanding of who God is begins to change.

There are many people who would say, well, yes, I believe in God, but their concept of who this God is, is not the God of the Bible at all.

For many people, their God is not too far removed from an adult Santa Claus, somebody who is simply there to bring what we need and what we want.

One writer said, you think he's just an errand boy to satisfy your every desire. And some people's notion of God is something like that.

[21 : 50] And when they don't get what they want, they suddenly turn on him and say, well, I don't want anything to do with this God anymore, because he hasn't given me what I want. We were listening last night in York Minster to the Messiah, and I was struck by the words from Malachi, who can endure the day of his coming?

Who can stand when he appears? See, Malachi saw God in his awesomeness and in his power and his might, and he says, how can sinful people like those, how can we endure the day of his coming?

Who could stand in his presence? Well, for many people, that wouldn't be a problem. Their notion of who God is, is such a slight one. And as I say, just there to fulfill your desires, that they would think that coming into his presence is nothing.

do we see God for being the majestic, holy, righteous, awesome God that he is?

So for many people, when the Holy Spirit begins to work in their lives, that's the first thing that changes. They begin to get a more biblical, real view of who God is.

[23 : 20] and that it is not an easy thing for a sinful person to come into the presence of such a God. I remember some years ago, hearing Phil Arthur from Lancaster, giving an illustration of how in New York, amongst the socialites, at one time the fashionable accessory was a pedigree cat.

All the film stars and people who had these pedigree cats. But these pedigree cats had claws, of course, and when they left them in their wonderful million dollar apartments, these cats' claws got in everything.

So they took their cats to the vet to have the claws removed. And he says that's what some people's gourd is like, an accessory with the claws removed, so that he can't actually have any effect.

And God will not be treated with contempt like that. Have we had our eyes open to see God for who he really is?

And again, one of the ways in which we can tell when God is beginning to move in somebody's heart and life, is that the Bible suddenly becomes a different book to them.

[24 : 44] It becomes a book that they want to read, becomes a book sometimes that they can't let go, you know, it's under the bedclothes, even when the lights are off reading it. Because we see, this is the book through which God has communicated.

I've known young people growing up who said, oh, I used to find the Bible stories really boring, and then suddenly when I became a Christian, I just wanted to read it more and more.

They could say like David, open my eyes, that I may see wonderful things in your law. And remember David only had the Old Testament and not even all of that.

We have so much more. We begin to see the world differently and world history differently. No longer do we see it as just something chaotic, but we really do recognize that history is his story, and that God is in control of it, and he is bringing it to his designed end.

And we begin to see ourselves differently. For some people, that means that they begin to see for the first time that they are actually somebody of worth.

[26 : 12] There are some people who think of themselves as being worthless people. And yet, when we begin to see that it is for such people as ourselves that the Son of God was willing to die, we begin to see that actually we are of some worth.

however wretched we may feel, we have acted and behaved in our lives, we were made in God's image. And we are not worthless.

But for many people, the view of ourselves that we need to change isn't from being worthless to being something of worth, but rather we need to be shaken out of our complacent sense of what good, decent people we are, to recognize that we are actually people who have rebelled against a holy God.

That was certainly the work that the Holy Spirit began to do in my life before I was converted. And maybe there are some people here this morning for whom that is the need that we need to see.

that we are sinful people who need forgiveness from a holy God. Remember Peter's reaction depart from me when he saw the Lord Jesus for I'm a sinful man.

[27 : 53] And that finally of course brings us on to see that when we are being transformed or when we are transformed, when we become Christians, Christians, we begin to see the Lord Jesus Christ for who he truly is.

That was the huge transformation in Saul's life. Saul knew of Jesus of Nazareth, but before that transformation in his life, he saw Jesus as being an enemy of true religion.

him. He saw him as being a false Messiah. And so he was determined to destroy all of his followers.

and of course when the Lord Jesus appeared to him, he had to recognize who he truly was.

And this very strong character becomes totally submissive on the road. He has to just listen and do what he is told.

[29 : 09] And for some of us, that's a hard thing, isn't it? To submit to the Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps we thought of him as a decent man, as a decent moral teacher, and we'll take those bits of his teaching that we like, and those bits that we don't like so much, we'll just put it on one side.

We cannot do that with him. He is the eternal son of God. And indeed, if you're honest and look at the accounts and the gospels of the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus, C.S. Lewis, who we mentioned before earlier, said you can read those scriptures and you can look and say that he was somebody who was trying to delude people on a grand scale, or you can come to the conclusion that he was somebody who had deluded himself on a grand scale, or you must come to the conclusion that he is who he claimed to be, the eternal son of God.

For he said the option to think that he was just a decent, good, moral teacher just has no intellectual basis if you read the gospels at all.

So do you see the Lord Jesus as the eternal son of God and the only one who can save you and make you right with a holy God.

Simeon, you'll read no doubt of Simeon during Christmas time when the Lord Jesus was brought into the temple as a baby. Simeon was somehow given the insight by the Holy Spirit into recognizing who Jesus was and he was ready to die then.

[31 : 10] He said, now dismiss your servant in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation. He recognized in Jesus the salvation of God.

so have our eyes been opened like souls were. As I said, that is something that is common to everybody when they become a Christian.

That scales forth by our eyes and we begin to see some things perhaps not as clearly as we will do later but we begin to see some things that we've never seen before about God, about ourselves about the Lord Jesus Christ.

And secondly, and not as lengthily, as well as having his eyes open, we are told Ananias, by the way, isn't he one of the great unsung heroes of the Bible?

I don't think we hear about him ever again but how faithful Ananias was. God appears to him and says, go and talk to Saul.

[32 : 24] And he said, what? Saul? Don't you know who Saul is? And God says, yes, I'm totally aware of who Saul is. Go to Saul. And he went.

And he says to Saul, Jesus who appeared to you on the road has sent me so that you may see again, first point that we made, and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

I wonder if you, if you're a Christian here this morning, if you've ever been asked by people perhaps at work or your neighbours as you've talked about even just going to church or believing in Jesus, or you've witnessed to them, I wonder if you've ever been confronted with the question I have a few times, oh, are you one of those born again Christians?

And it's always said with a slight sneer, isn't it? Are you one of those born again Christians? And I always replied about, what other type do you know? There's a lot of people who seem to think that being a born again Christian was something that was invented by Billy Graham, that he's associated with the phrase, but of course it goes back, doesn't it, to the Lord Jesus Christ, and when Nicodemus came to him, Jesus says to him, I tell you the truth, no one can even see the kingdom of God, never mind be in it, no one can see the kingdom of God, unless he is born again, or born from the book, just as you have had a physical birth, you need a spiritual birth, to be brought from spiritual death, to spiritual life, and every Christian is born of the spirit,

God, again, again, in that same conversation, Jesus points that out to be, the wind blows wherever it pleases, you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from, where it is going, so it is, with everyone born of the spirit, and Saul of Tarsus, Paul as he later became known, made this very, very clear, in the various letters that he wrote, think of the letter he wrote to the church in Rome, and in there he says, hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us, and that wasn't just to a special group of them, it was to all of them, again he's writing to the whole church, and he says, you however are controlled not by the sinful nature, but by the spirit, if the spirit of

[35 : 21] God lives in you, and if anyone does not have the spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ, in other words he's pointing out that having the Holy Spirit living in you, is the common experience of every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, on the basis of his death and resurrection, Jesus according to his promise, sends the Holy Spirit to dwell in the heart of all who will believe in him, let's not underestimate that ever, again you see some people might have this thought of I would love to be a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ but I'm afraid that if I made a commitment to Jesus I would somehow or the other fail in the future and I would let people down and I would disappoint people, that you may have a genuine fear that you couldn't maintain your confession of faith, well let me tell you if that's a problem with you that there isn't a single person in this room who by their own strength and will power could maintain their professional faith, the only way anybody can do it is because of the grace of God and because the Holy

Spirit has come to live in our hearts and lives and he picks us up and he teaches us again and he brings us back into the right path time and time again when we continue to fail.

So you are not on your own in living the Christian life but we are strengthened, we are empowered, we are led by the Spirit of God who lives in us and it is the Spirit of God who gave Saul the ability to do the work for which he had been called.

So Saul when he was transformed he began to see things again, he particularly saw the Lord Jesus Christ for who he truly was and stopped persecuting him and his people but instead worshipped him and confessed him.

He was filled with the Holy Spirit and immediately he was baptized. That is the record again, you'll see through Acts time and time again that people were repented, believed and were baptized.

[38 : 13] They didn't wait three or four years to find out whether they were mature enough, it was a sign of their having come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Or maybe that God would bless us all this morning. I pray that if there is anybody here who is not yet a Christian that you would just humbly ask God to open your eye to see Jesus for who he truly is and every one of us whether we've been a Christian for a year or for 30 or 40 years we need to continually have our eyes cleared our spiritual eyes cleared so we can see ourselves our God this world our Lord Jesus Christ as they truly are.

May he continue to do that work in us. thank you.