

The Challenge of Saul's Conversion

by George Verwer

The sermon explores the profound implications of Saul's conversion, highlighting the inevitability of suffering and the transformative power of faith in Christ.

Duration: 46:54

Scripture: Acts 7:54, Acts 14:22, Hebrews 11:32

Topics: "Saul"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares his experience of studying a particular passage in the Bible and being overwhelmed with thoughts and challenges that came out of it. The passage he refers to is about Saul's encounter with a bright light on the road to Damascus, which leaves him blind. Saul is then led by others into Damascus, where he spends three days without eating or drinking. The speaker emphasizes the transformative power of the gospel and encourages the audience to consider their own personal stories of coming to know the Lord. He also highlights the significance of Saul's conversion, which is mentioned multiple times in the Acts of the Apostles and other epistles.

Transcript

I think when anybody gives a testimony and shares how they became a Christian, there's a sort of double-edged effect, isn't there? First of all, it's an encouragement to Christians. I love hearing how people became Christians, and I don't think I'll ever grow tired of hearing people tell their story of how they came to know the Lord. I mean, we could go round the room tonight, and there'd be I don't know how many stories of how people found Jesus.

Someone has said that there are many roads to Jesus, but there's only one road to God, and it's always a great encouragement to me. But it's also a great challenge to those who aren't Christians, because they sit or stand, wherever they are, and hear again how somebody came to know the Lord, of a life that's been changed, of something that's happened to somebody that they've not experienced, and yet they can see if they're honest and open that there are many things that that person's got that they haven't got. I mean, I don't know of this evening, hardly any of you, but maybe there's somebody here this evening, and you've many times heard about Jesus.

You've been on occult trips, and every night you've heard the message preached, and still you've actually never come to that point of giving your life to the Lord. Well, who knows, maybe at the end of this evening, or before this weekend's over, this could be the time when your life changes. And, as everyone has a

different story, so, in the Acts of the Apostles, we've got five different stories of five different individuals who came to know the Lord, in quite some detail.

But there's one, one that stands supreme. It stands supreme because it's three times mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. Not sufficient with reading about it three times there.

It's also mentioned in the Epistle to the Philippians. And as though that wasn't sufficient, there's even a potted account of it in the Epistle to the Galatians. And I think anything that's mentioned five times in the Bible we ought to sit down and think about and consider.

You probably guess who I'm talking about, can't you? And we're going to look at the first account of how this very unlikely convert came to know Jesus. So if you've got a Bible, if you'd like to turn to Acts chapter 9, Acts chapter 9. Acts chapter 9, I'm going to read from verses 1 down to 20, headed Saul's conversion. As I read it, try and imagine this is the first time you've ever read this account.

Because it's pretty dramatic. Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. 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.

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, he replied.

Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do. The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless. They heard the sound but did not see anyone.

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. For three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything.

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, Ananias? Yes, Lord, he answered. 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.

In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight. Lord, Ananias answered, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem, and he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name. 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. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. 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. Immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. I don't know how many of you actually do any speaking.

I guess quite a number of you do. And you'll know if you do that you sit down and first of all search for a subject if you haven't been given one, and then you try and sort of break it up into parts and work out what you're going to say and how you're going to say it. And it can be a real struggle, can't it? I had an amazing experience when I came to this passage recently.

Opened the Bible and thoughts, and this hardly ever happens to me, thoughts and challenges came out of this passage so fast that I got a pen and I wrote them down as quickly as I could. I was afraid that I might miss something that God was saying. In fact I've got eight challenges, but I'm not going to share all of those with you tonight.

You'll be pleased to hear. I'm going to share three or four of them that just came straight from this account of the conversion of Saul. And the first one I'm going to mention I very rarely hear mentioned in churches at all.

In fact, to be honest, I can't ever remember going to a church and hearing somebody directly preach on this. I expect they have, but if they have it's been very seldom. And yet it's clearly found in this passage that we've just read.

And this is it, the first challenge. It's quite clear to me that from this account persecution, affliction, or suffering is promised for the child of God. If you've got your Bibles, if you turn back just two chapters to the end of Acts chapter 7, see what happened here to one young Christian called Stephen.

I'm going to read from verse 54. It's powerful stuff. Acts chapter 7 verse 54.

Remember as we read it that there was Saul watching all this going on. He was a witness to this. Stephen has just spoken and it says, When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Look, he said, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. At this they covered their ears and yelling at the top of their voices they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

Meanwhile the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Then he fell on his knees and cried out, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

When he had said this, he fell asleep and Saul was there giving approval to his death. That was how the first young Christian martyr went into heaven, stoned to death. And there was Saul standing as a witness.

And it's interesting, you know, how similarly Stephen died to the way that Jesus died in terms of Stephen's reaction and the very words that Stephen used. And do you know that all 12 disciples bar one died a violent and a vicious death? I'm going to read a list to you now. You may not have heard this list before.

If you want to copy it down, come and see me afterwards. But this is how, as far as we know, the first 12 disciples died. And only one, you'll see, actually died of natural causes or of old age.

Andrew was crucified in a Greek colony. Bartholomew was flayed alive in Armenia. James was thrown off the pinnacle of a temple and clubbed to death at the bottom.

That was James, the brother of Jesus. James, Zebedee's son, was beheaded in Jerusalem, one of the first. John, his brother, was the only one who died of extreme old age.

You'll probably remember he died on the island of Patmos. Judas went out and hanged himself. Matthew was slain by the sword in Ethiopia.

Peter, so legend has it, was crucified upside down, head downwards, during the persecution of Emperor Nero. Philip was hanged against a pillar. Simon was crucified in Persia.

Thaddeus was shot to death with arrows. And Thomas was run through the body with a lance in the east of India. And his church, the church he founded, the church there founded by Thomas, is still found there in India, as he went as a missionary there.

That's how the first early twelve disciples died. And the Bible promises, again, it's clearly written in Scripture, for every Christian that there will be, at some stage, suffering, persecution, or affliction. Now, as I say, I don't hear this preached in churches.

It's not something that's mentioned. But it's quite clearly found in the Word of God. In Acts chapter 14, verse 22, it says we must go through much tribulation or difficulty to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now, I go in many Christians' houses. And often you see nice little texts framed on the wall. Have you seen them? The Lord is my shepherd.

There's some nice little sheep, they're skipping, gambling, if that's the right word, through the meadow. Or, my God shall supply all your need. That's great, isn't it? These little stitched pictures that you see.

And you like them, and they're encouraging, and they make you feel cosy and warm and happy. But I've yet to go into a Christian's house and see framed on the wall texts like Acts 14, verse 22. We must, through much tribulation, enter the kingdom of God.

To be honest, if I saw one on the wall, I'd probably go out of the house again. But it is part of the Gospel, isn't it? It's part of what it means to be a Christian. It's part of sharing in what Jesus suffered for us, and we can share with him in that way.

And, I've got to also add, that nowhere in the Bible does it say, but don't worry, it doesn't matter if you're suffering, it doesn't matter what affliction you're going through, it doesn't matter about the persecution, because you will be miraculously delivered. So just hang in there, just one or two more seconds, and you'll be snatched out of the situation. Because that's what God does, he comes along, and when he sees his people suffering, immediately they are relieved in a miraculous way.

Well, the Bible doesn't promise that. Nowhere does it say, that's okay, you will be taken from that situation, and all will be well. For some, maybe, yes, but nowhere are we promised universal deliverance.

And perhaps one of the best places to see that is in the book of Hebrews, chapter 11, which is a great chapter on faith. Now, we haven't got time to read it all, but I'm just going to read a few verses from the end. And just listen to what happened to these two groups of people.

And you'll see that the list starts off, dare I say, very encouragingly, and then halfway through it suddenly changes to something that perhaps isn't quite so encouraging, but is nonetheless part of what the gospel is. Just listen to this. Hebrews 11, going to read in verse 32.

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised, who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, escaped the edge of the sword, whose weakness was turned to strength, and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. It's great stuff, isn't it? Stirring reading. Women received back their dead, raised to life again.

Others were tortured and refused to be released so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned.

They were sawn in two. They were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted, and ill-treated.

The world was not worthy of them. Isn't that interesting? You've got this list. And the first half, miraculous deliverance.

The second half, no deliverance. Not a hint of it. In fact, the very opposite, it would seem.

I mean, look at some of the things here. They were sawn in two. Just the thought of it, you know? They were stoned.

They were persecuted and flogged and chained and put to death by the sword. So we can't go to people with our Gospel and say, well, great, come to Jesus. All your problems will get sorted out immediately.

All your suffering's gonna finish. There'll be no more affliction. You won't be persecuted.

You can live a happy little holy life in a nice little huddle with other believers and all will be well as we cruise in our Christian steamer slowly into heaven. Because that's quite honestly the impression that some people give of what it means to be a Christian. Certainly in some meetings where people call you to come forward.

It's very attractive. It's like holding out a spiritual box of chocolates. You know, come on.

It's free. It's wonderful. It's great.

And all will be well. It's hardly surprising, is it, that the people that go forward at that sort of meeting aren't found much later to even be believing in God in some cases. No.

There's no promise of universal deliverance. And I'm afraid it gets a bit bleaker because also it would seem from this account in the Acts of the Apostles that some are actually chosen to suffer. In that chapter that we read, Acts chapter 9, you'll remember that about verse 15 the message is given to Ananias, who's a Christian, to go and meet with Saul.

And the words here, it says in verse 15, But the Lord said to Ananias, Go, this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles. Verse 16, I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. Amazing, isn't it? It seems as though Saul was chosen to suffer for the sake of Jesus.

Now, I've got to be honest, and I'm sure you would agree with me here, I hope I haven't been chosen to suffer. But I equally know that part of being a Christian involves actually knowing something of affliction and suffering and persecution. Because it's part of what it is to know the Lord, to actually stand, as a Christian, in the world today, whatever our situation is.

And I go to a lot of churches, and do you know, I sometimes find people who it seems have been chosen to suffer. Almost every church, you find one family who seems to have gone through ten times more than anybody else in the whole church put together. You know, this has happened to them, disaster here, tragedy there, suffering here.

And yet, do you know, often they are the families that bear the greatest testimony to Jesus Christ, and really reflect the gospel in the way they live, and in the way they behave, and even in the things that they say. It's incredible, isn't it? Persecution, affliction and suffering is part of what it is to be a Christian. Now, you might say, well, what sort of God do we serve? That he just allows us just to go through all these things and stands, in many cases, remote? No, no, no.

The Bible doesn't say that. It's not a haphazard thing. It's not just by chance you go through this or go through that.

It's clearly measured by God's hand. He allows so much, but no more. You remember, weren't you, that Satan went to God and wanted permission to really test Job.

And God said, OK, you can do this, you can do that, but take his life? No. You can go so far. You have my permission, but there you stop.

And Job, of course, became a tremendous testimony to one who patiently suffered and ended up rejoicing and praising God. So it's not a haphazard thing. And it's also got to be said that Christ is the goal.

I mean, what does suffering do to the Christian? I think it does one of two things. Either it drives them, and this is very sad, really, it drives them right away from God. I mean, I've met Christians, and I don't know if they were Christians originally, but they seemed to be following the Lord.

And some disaster has happened, and it's driven them right away from God. But more often than not, I meet Christians who, because of what they've gone through, are stronger as a result of it. You read the book I've just recommended, Max Sinclair's book, *Halfway to Heaven*.

And what he went through, that dreadful accident, how it brought him that much closer to God. And, of course, perhaps the better known, Johnny Erickson, she was hardly walking with God at all before that accident. And today, look at her in a wheelchair, singing, writing, painting pictures, speaking, doing more than most of us, I think, put together at one time.

Fantastic. But, is this all negative? We're all going to suffer. I see you're all looking fairly depressed and gloomy now.

Some may be chosen. There's no promise of universal deliverance. But I've left out one very important point.

This is vital, actually. Although the Bible doesn't promise deliverance, it does promise victory in the situation. In other words, his presence in the midst of the suffering can transform, maybe not the situation,

but can transform us.

I mean, that's clear, isn't it, from the story of Stephen Stoning. Did he go wailing and crying and arguing with God as the stones rained down? Not at all. And I'm sure, as Saul stood there and saw that Christian die, that, perhaps, was one of the first things that made him seriously consider the Gospel for himself.

I don't know how many people saw that scene die, but the way that young man gloriously went to sleep in Jesus and went home, surely must have impressed him. Surely must have made a difference. And I know the few Christians that I've actually seen die, I will never, ever forget it.

Never forget it. Remember the first young Christian taken to this hospital, this old lady. She was, I think she died within half an hour of me actually being there around the last time in the hospital bed.

And she was reciting, I think it was the 23rd Psalm. Her eyes were closed. Then she went through John 14.

She was reciting this. The atmosphere. It wasn't just what I felt as a Christian.

The nurses and doctors, they all remarked on it. The peace and the calmness in the midst of suffering. The presence of Christ makes the difference.

Is that your testimony, I wonder? Certainly mine. Do you know, 10 years ago, almost to the day, give a couple of weeks or so, I had a pretty dramatic experience. I thought I was going to die.

Perhaps I was over-dramatising the situation. I was involved in a motorbike accident. It was a head-on collision between two motorbikes.

Crazy, isn't it? I was going along on my mighty Honda 70. There was a car coming in the opposite direction. And as it was about 100 yards away, from behind this car came this mighty Yamaha going about 80, 90 miles an hour, I don't know what, straight along the road in my direction into me.

And I knew I couldn't do anything. I just thought, well, what's the idiot doing? He's on the wrong side of the road. Right high over the pavement, over in a field on my back.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move. The leg was in absolute agony.

I subsequently needed a blood transfusion and I don't know what else I was lying in this field. And I said, well, God, is this it? I really thought that was the end of my life. There was nobody around.

The other guy had come off his bike and was spinning somewhere down the road. The car driver had stopped. There was no street light, so he was just looking around for a few bodies, you know.

I said, well, God, is this it? And he answered me. I'll tell you what he said. He said, no, Gareth, there's more work for you to do.

Now, not out loud, not in the way that you heard me say it, but in here. It was engraved on my brain. No, Gareth, he said, there's more work for you to do.

His presence transformed the whole of the subsequent month in hospital, five operations, and all the rest of it that went on. Because he'd spoken to me. What did he say? He said, well, there's more work for you to do.

That meant I was going to go right through that experience, come out the other side, still serving God, and that he was going to be there. Fantastic! So we were put in the ambulance, side by side. The guy who'd gone in to me, all he did was break his arm.

And me, who as a result of that lost half my right foot, I laid on the other side in the ambulance. And who was the happiest? Well, he certainly wasn't happy. I was.

Why? Because the presence of Christ in the difficulty, in the suffering, made all the difference. I started singing choruses. Pretty unusual, isn't it? Ambulance, going back to the hospital, you know, driver at the front.

I started singing. Praise the name of Jesus. And the ambulance driver's friend, he looked at me, he said, well, that's one way to keep yourself happy, I suppose.

Hey, wonderful! Oh, and the pain, the pain didn't disappear. In fact, the pain got worse and worse as I got nearer the hospital. But the reality of the presence of Christ.

Now, if these things aren't real, I don't want to know about Christianity, to be honest. If you can't get two people in beds, next to each other, in a hospital, one's a Christian and one's not a Christian, if the Christian can't be seen to be different or be reacting differently from the non-Christian, what's the power of the gospel then? If it doesn't work when we're at our lowest, then there's no real depth to it, is there? So they wheeled me in and put me into a little cubicle and this African doctor came. He looked at my leg and went, like this.

I don't know how they train these doctors these days. I said to him, where are you from? He said, I'm from Ghana. I said, oh, Ghana.

I said, I've been very near your country. I've been to a country called Burkina Faso. It was then called Upper Volta when I was there.

He said, oh. I said, I was with some missionaries. I said, are you a Christian? Imagine it.

I'm on this slab. My foot's all absolute agony, all covered up. And I thought, well, you know, the Lord's spoken to me.

Let's get straight to work. Are you a Christian? There was a long pause. If you ask anybody if they're a Christian, there's a long pause.

I'll tell you now, 99.99% of the time, they're not. After a long pause, he said, yes. I said, oh, that's great.

How long have you been a Christian? Another long pause. All my life. I said, oh, I said, well, actually, you know, the Bible says that we're born sinners.

We're not born Christians. And that we need to become a Christian. And so, right from the start, God, the presence of Christ, in the situation, even gave me the opportunity to witness, as I was waiting to go down to the theatre and have the first of many, many different operations and things happening.

You see? That's what it means to know Jesus. We don't escape suffering. We don't escape persecution.

We have to experience these things, but the presence of Christ transforms us in the situation. The situation may not change, but we're changed. Praise the Lord.

And how many people come to know Jesus because they're witnessed to by Christians in hospitals? Lost count. Many, many of them. Many actually as they're going down to the theatre for an operation, or through other people in hospital visiting them.

I could spend all evening talking about that, but that's not what I'm here to talk about. Paul said, later in Philippians, I might know him, the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings. And I'm still learning to try and, you know, agree with the third part.

Yes, I want to know him. Yes, I want to know the power of his resurrection, but the fellowship of his sufferings, it's a difficult one, isn't it? So that's the first challenge that God clearly gave to me as I was reading Acts chapter 9. Here's the second challenge. Again, it's found in this chapter.

Conversion affects those around. Now, in your imagination, can you see this scene? Here is Paul. I imagine him as short and bald.

I may be wrong. Maybe difficult, you know, short-sighted as well. I'm not a clue, but that's how I imagine him.

And he's marching, you know, fast, and all these other men are trying to keep up with him. He's got permission from the chief priests to go and get any Christians who are actually in the synagogues. Pull them out of the synagogues.

This is Damascus he's going to. Pull them out of the synagogues, and, well, I don't know what he's going to do with them. It says in verse 1, he's breathing out murderous threats.

Sounds like some evil monster, doesn't it? You know, breathing out murderous threats. Yes, let's torture them. Let's kill them.

Wow, that's a powerful picture. And that's his one purpose. And, amazingly, he believed that he was doing the will of God.

Because Christians, to him, were a little sect, a little cult that had deviated from true Judaism. And if he could just mop up these few Christians and mop them out, I guess, then everything would be well and we could all continue to follow the true Jewish faith. So there he was, marching away, keen as anything.

And he wasn't far from Damascus. And what happens? Bright light shines from the sky. He falls to the ground.

All the other men, they all fall to the ground. So there's a mass collapse of bodies, I guess, on the road. Now, it's got to be pretty bright, hasn't it? Because we're talking about Syria in the Middle East.

We're talking about probably the middle of the day. And this light was brighter than the sun in that time of day, in that place in the world. So they fall to the ground.

The men with him, it seems from what we read, hear a noise. But Saul actually has a conversation. You can read it.

A conversation. After a while, they get up. Saul gets up.

He says he opens his eyes and sees nothing. Completely blind. And so, instead of being the leader, he's the one who's led.

They take him by the hand, like a little helpless young child or baby. Come on, Saul. Give me your hand.

And he's taken slowly, blind, into Damascus. What does he do when he gets there? Not only is he blind, but for three days he doesn't eat or drink anything. He doesn't drink anything in the Middle East for three days.

I think it's fair to say that those around Saul would be saying to themselves, something's happened here. What has happened? Now, Saul was beginning to realize what had happened. But the others around, they knew something had happened, but what? And only as Saul began to share with them, did they realize that he'd had a tremendous spiritual experience.

And the very one that he was going to persecute and get rid of was the very one who changed his life. Incredible. They wouldn't have understood really what was going on, I'm sure.

And I think sometimes, you know, we don't realize the effect our lives have on others when we become Christians. When I became a Christian, my parents said, my mother particularly said, oh, you're just going through a phase. We're talking about over 20 years ago now.

Some phase, isn't it? Just going through a phase. And my sister, who, I was at college then, I was writing to my sister back home, and when I saw her, she said, you've changed. I said, what do you mean I've changed? She said, well, something's happened, hasn't it? Now, I was completely unaware of that.

I mean, I knew I'd become a Christian, but I had no realization that my life was affecting all these people in different ways. And I believe that when we get to heaven, we will be amazed to see those whose lives are being affected by our lives, really. The people who are actually watching us and listening to what we say and thinking about the things that we do.

And I believe that the conversion of people affects dramatically those around. You might be sitting there thinking, oh, I'm a failure, you know. I let the Lord down in the office, I'm no good at school, and I don't seem to be doing much for God.

Don't you believe it. Don't let the devil accuse you in that way. You're being watched, you know.

I often realize when I get out of my house into the car, the neighbors, obviously, all know I'm a Christian, drive down the road, and if there's another car coming the other way, I stop and wave them through. Keep the old evangelical smile. Play choruses out the kitchen window, you know.

We sometimes think, and then when we're out in the district, we don't care so much. Yeah, we'd be surprised. We'd be surprised to find out those who are actually watching us, you know, and marking and noticing these things.

Because our lives really do have an effect. You know, I'm a schoolteacher. I teach nine and ten-year-old children.

And I have a club after school on a Tuesday. It's called Adventurers. And some time ago, at a parent's evening, this mother, remember, I can see her now.

She was pushing a pram, and she's pushing it straight towards me. I thought it was at me for a moment. Straight up to me.

She said, you Mr. Bolton? I said, yes. She said, what do you do with the children after school on a Tuesday? I said, oh, after school on a Tuesday, yes. That's an interesting question.

We do some singing. We have some quizzes and Bible stories and prizes and give out magazines and other things. And eventually, after I'd run through all this, I stopped and said, well, why do you ask? She said, my daughter, Julie, came home last Tuesday.

She flung open the back door. She said, mum, I've been changed. Mum, I've changed.

My daughter, Julie, said this mother, went upstairs to her bedroom, and she spent an hour reading her Good News Bible. Now, usually, she doesn't read at all, but she spent an hour reading her Good News Bible. Mr. Bolton, what's happened to my daughter? I can't wait until Julie's 16, 17, or 18 to tell her of this incident.

I'm quite sure she has no idea of the impact of her young life at the age of nine or ten, then, that coming to Christ has had on not just her mother, but on her father and on the rest of her family. Quite unaware of it. She knows that something has happened, but as others have watched, they've realised that something else has happened as well.

The fact of coming to Christ dramatically affects, often, those round about us. And how many people become Christians because they see the change in the likes of you and I? Even, perhaps, we don't know about it for years afterwards. I remember receiving a letter from a former teacher ten years after she'd left the school, she became a Christian, partly through conversations I'd had with her, and I'd even forgotten who she was, almost.

Incredible, isn't it? Our conversion, or conversion, affects those around. Thirdly, this is very important, the third challenge, the Gospel is unlimited in whom it touches and changes. Unlimited.

Don't limit the Gospel. It's very easy to look at a person and say, oh, no hope, or, well, no. It doesn't look the Christian type.

It doesn't look the sort of person that's going to respond to the Gospel. If you were a group of early Christians, imagine we're all sitting around together, and we're talking. Who do you think is probably the last person on Earth we could ever imagine becoming a Christian and preaching the Gospel? Pretty obvious, isn't it? The one whose very name would make you tremble and your knees would knock together.

The one who some were even plotting where he was on a map, you know, where's Saul today? He's moving down from there. He could hit us in about two weeks' time. Should we go on holiday? You know? His very name would conjure up just terrible fear.

I mean, he had power to get Christians. He could murder them. He could have them stoned.

He could have them put in prison. He could have them tortured. He could have them persecuted.

I'm sure his name would bring fear, literal fear, into people's hearts. He must have been just about the last person that anybody could possibly ever have imagined standing up and preaching the Gospel. And that story, if it's nothing else, is proof of the power of the Gospel, isn't it, to change people's lives? Surely.

Now, I ask you this question. Do you think that at any stage, anybody seriously prayed for Saul to become a Christian? I wonder if anybody ever sat down and actually prayed for him. Well, I've got some rather interesting news for you.

Maybe it's not news. But, in fact, it would seem from the Bible that, yes, people did pray for him to become a Christian before he was a Christian. And I'll tell you how we know.

In the very last chapter of the book of Romans, there's a list of names of people who Paul greets. And amongst those he greets, in verse 7 of chapter 16, are some of his relatives. Romans, chapter 16, verse 7, says this.

Now, often when I get to a list of names, I just sort of rattle through it. But it's worth stopping at this verse. It's worth stopping at all the verses, but this one particularly.

Romans 16, verse 7 says, Greet Andronicus and Junius, my relatives, who have been in prison with me. Here they are. Here it goes.

They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. Now, you don't really have to put two and two together to work that one out, do you? So there we are. His relatives, in prison, were Christians before he was.

I think it's fairly safe to say that some of their prayers, if not most of their prayers, if not all their prayers, were targeted on their relative, cousin or whatever, who wasn't a Christian, and in fact was actively opposing and persecuting and harming believers. So never look at anybody, whether it's somebody at the school you go to, whether it's somebody in the office, whether it's somebody in your street, and say, beyond redemption. Because that phrase, friends, is nowhere found in the Bible, is it? Beyond redemption.

I don't think that actually exists. No one is beyond redemption. No one is beyond the challenge of the word of God.

That book I was recommending earlier on, that fanatical Shiite Iranian Muslim came to know Jesus and his life. He now goes around countries, even I think some Muslim countries, telling people that Jesus is the son of God. Jesus is the way.

Jesus can change people's lives. It's so easy, isn't it, to get put off. There's hope for people like Gaddafi.

There's hope for Saddam Hussein. I said to my class the other day, how many of you hate Saddam Hussein? They all put their hands up. I said, what do you think God thinks of Saddam Hussein? Do you think God loves him? They said, yes.

I said, well, what should we do then? Should we hate him? Or should we try, like God, to love him and pray for him? It's so easy to write people off, isn't it? Praise the Lord that God didn't write us off at some stage. Because we seem so far away from the gospel, from knowing Jesus. No one is beyond the reach of God.

And certainly some of the individuals I've met, I know that if I'd met them before they were a Christian, I would have just disregarded them. Remember in Trafalgar Square once, we were doing some evangelism. And there was a coach party full of old ladies.

I love giving tracks out to old ladies. It's so easy. Here you are, darling.

Pop it in your handbag. Read it when you get home. Oh, thank you, love.

You say that just to the ladies, not the men. Going around giving out these tracks. And they all say, thank you, thank you.

And then out of the corner of my eye, right at the end of this concrete seat that they've got around the edge of Trafalgar Square, was this punk rocker, you know? Sort of sitting there. And he had half a bottle of wine. And all sorts of things are going through my mind.

First of all, he's beyond hope. I mean, I wouldn't have said it. That's what I was thinking.

Anyway, he's drunk. Never witness to a drunk person. So I thought, right.

About six old people before the punk rocker, I'll just turn and walk away, you see. It's basically just trying to cover up my own cowardice. So about six old people, I came in here.

Here you are, darling. Pop it in your handbag. Read it when you get home.

And I was walking away. And I heard this voice say, Oi! What about me, mate? And there was this fellow, you know, with his girlfriend, who was French, with his bottle of wine. He wanted one of these leaflets.

I thought, oh dear. The last time I heard anybody give a track to a punk rocker, they ate it. Inwardly digesting the word of God, maybe.

Anyway, I went round. And I gave it to him. What's this all about, then? I said, well, it's, you know, how you can... I sort of shared the Gospel with him, his girlfriend.

She was French. And he said, Is what you're saying the same as what that fellow's saying over there? There was a guy actually preaching the Gospel, you see, the evangelist. I said, yeah.

He said, could I go and talk with him? I said, yeah, yeah, sure. Of course you can. You're welcome.

So, he got up, so did his girlfriend. They walked right across Trafalgar Square, had about a 20-minute conversation with this evangelist, you know. And I got home at night, and I was thinking about the day, all the tracks I'd given out.

I thought, now, where was my best contact over the day? Which old lady looked the most responsive? In fact, my best contact of the day was the one I'd already decided, in my mind, was not going to receive the Gospel, was not going to accept a tract, was not even worth me bothering talking to. Just as well it's not my job to see people saved, isn't it? Just as well it's the work of God, eh? How easily we're put off by appearances. I know it is a bit disturbing if you come across someone who's somewhat different from yourself.

But, you see, God doesn't look at the outward appearance. We do. God looks at the heart.

And we make a great mistake if we judge people just by what they look like. And then, very briefly, last of all, the last challenge, and this affects all of us, it's quite clear that when you become a Christian, you come into a family where everyone is equal. I always like Ananias.

He receives this message from the Lord, go and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. And isn't he start to knock, Saul, he says, I've heard many reports about this man. All the harm he's done.

And he's come here with authority from the chief priest to arrest all, all, who call on your name. The Lord says, go. I've chosen him.

He's my man. Praise the Lord. Ananias, in fear and trembling and weakness, all put off not just by appearances but by things he's heard, goes.

What does he do? He walks in. Tremendous picture. This man who's probably killed maybe even some of his friends and relatives.

He walks in. He puts his hand on the head of Saul. And he says to him, and he put his hands on his head.

He says, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, and goes on to speak. That's great, isn't it? Brother Saul. Ananias has quite a hard time convincing the rest of the church that Saul is actually converted.

A lot don't believe it. They think he's just pretending to be a Christian because he's going to come and snatch other people out of synagogues and out of churches and persecute them. No, we're all equal.

It's great, isn't it? And this is a tremendous, or has potential to be a tremendous witness to the world round about us. There's no other society that's like Christians. How can I put it? It's almost like a community within a community.

That's how someone described my church when I came recently. He said, Hey, it's like a community within a community. And you look around, you can see a doctor sharing a hymn book with an unemployed worker, a lorry driver next to a company secretary, a school teacher next to a nurse, a little child next to a single parent.

And you've got this complete cross-section of society. And it's a tremendous attraction because you can't find it anywhere else. But it's tremendous potential, of course, to go wrong.

Because, you see, the devil knows how attractive a group of Christians can be who love Jesus and can work and live together. And he will do everything, absolutely everything, to divide Christians. He knows if he can divide Christians, he's going to set the cause of Christ back in a tremendous way because people are going to look at the church and say, Look at all these people arguing with each other.

They're not even talking to each other. I don't want to go there. But when he sees this whole group all mixed together, sharing together something that's changed their lives, it's just quite incredible.

You see, the church isn't a club. It's a family. A club, you join, and when you get fed up with it, you leave.

A family, you're born into. In fact, if they're part of your family, they're one of your relatives, aren't they? And you see, we don't choose our relatives, do we? Sometimes we wish we could, but we don't. Choose our friends, but not our relatives.

And we are related, like it or not, one with the other. And as I finish, I want to challenge you to challenge myself too. Those who are our brothers and sisters, who maybe we're going to go back to in a few days' time, those who are our Christian relatives, sometimes you have to work very hard at relationships.

It's so easy. Again, we're so prejudiced. Somebody who's a Christian, you can't stand.

You look at them and you just see problems walking around on two legs, don't you? They come in the room and you want to go out the other door. Everything about them, the way they dress, their face, their hairstyle, the colour of their clothes, their accent, everything. We've got to learn to see beyond and through that to the person's heart.

Maybe we need to understand something about where they're coming from, the experiences they've had. And then fight hard to love them. Make it a labour to love people.

Otherwise the devil can so easily put a wedge in, which he could easily have done between Saul and Ananias, and prevent the cause of Christ going forward. So there we are. I have other challenges, but we've really run out of time.

But if there are any of you, you don't know this Jesus I've been talking about. You've seen Jesus in other people. Maybe you're here because your friends are Christian.

You don't know the Lord. Well, I'm glad to give you a tract, even if you aren't an old lady. A tract is just a little leaflet explaining how you can know Jesus too and come into the kingdom of God.

Let's pray. Father, we want to thank you this evening for this life-changing gospel that you've committed to us. Thank you that you didn't give up on us, that you called us out of darkness into light, from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God.

And thank you that in our difficulties, in our suffering, whether they're mental or physical or emotional, Lord, you're there right beside us, and you give us the strength to go on. And you can even transform us in the middle of difficult situations. How we praise you, and how we praise you above all for transforming our lives.

Continue with us, we pray, this weekend and in the coming days of this week. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.

Amen.

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