

# Growing in faith in the Lord Jesus

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[0:00] So today's passage is taken from Book of Acts chapter 9, verse 19 to 31. You can follow along your own Bible.

If you don't have a Bible, you can grab one in the front of the stage or the back of the hall or near the entrance. It's on page 863.

Acts chapter 9, verse 19 to 31. Let's hear the God's word today. Verse 19.

And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests? But Saul increased all the more in strength and confined the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him.

[1:25] But his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, knowing him in a basket. And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.

But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.

So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists, but they were seeking to kill him.

And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. Let's believe and respond to God's true and living word.

[2:40] Henry, do you want to come on up? Henry, you probably don't need much of an introduction, but let me just introduce you in case some people don't know you.

So those that have recently joined Watermark in the last two years or so might not know Henry and Florence. Henry and Florence were wonderful, wonderful members of the Watermark congregation for about three years, two years or so, before they relocated back to Europe and moved to Europe two and a half years ago and are back in Hong Kong visiting.

And when I heard that they were visiting, I said, Henry, we'd love to have you to continue to open up God's word. So Henry's going to be preaching this morning. But just if you think, who is this person I've never seen before? Where did he come from?

And I might not see again for a couple of months. Henry and Florence, great to have you back with us this morning. This church family have missed you guys the last two years, and it's lovely to have you with us. So Henry, thank you for opening up God's word to us.

Thank you, Kevin. Thanks for that. Welcome and thank you for asking me to preach. It's a great privilege and honor to do that, of course. It's just great to be back in Hong Kong.

[3:46] Kevin didn't say that I'm Irish. My wife is French. We're now living in France, but we lived more than half our lives in Hong Kong. So Hong Kong is our real home.

And it's wonderful to be back in Watermark, to see so many of you that we do know and many others that we don't know. But, hey, that means the church is growing. And what a great venue you have here.

Wow, it's fantastic. We've been praying for that as well. And may the Lord bless you as a church and as a community of saints, of God's people who meet and worship here. And as you minister and serve the Lord, may this be a great venue to do that, that his work may grow and that his kingdom would be extended. So our passage this morning has already been read to us by Sherman, Acts 9, verses 19 to 31.

A couple of years ago, I took a course in theology. And this particular course was entitled Conversion and Transformation. One of the assignments of that course was to write an essay about my own conversion and transformation and ongoing spiritual development.

[5:03] In doing some research for the essay, I came across a simple but profound statement in one of the required textbooks. In that book, a church historian called Alan Crater wrote, Conversion to Christianity involves a change of a person's belief, belonging, and behavior.

The phrase really stuck with me. Conversion to Christianity involves a change in a person's belief, belonging, and behavior.

You know, in many ways, the book of Acts, certainly the second part of the book of Acts, could read like an extended reflection on the conversion and transformation of Saul of Tarsus.

Throughout Luke's narrative, it's abundantly clear that Saul's conversion involved a massive change for him in his belief, in his belonging, and in his behavior.

And so here in Acts 9, 19-31, we discover what happened to Paul after his extraordinary conversion on the Damascus Road, his encounter with the risen Christ.

[6:16] Saul's conversion itself, I take it, was not really typical. People do not normally fall to the ground, are blinded by a blazing light, and hear the audible voice of the risen Lord Jesus as part of the conversion experience.

But what happened afterwards is typical, or ought to be typical, of genuine Christian conversion and transformation. Kevin last week dealt with Saul's conversion on the Damascus Road.

He had the five Ps, remember? Today I've got the three Bs. But he talked about how God deeply changes us when we know Christ.

And today, we're going to be looking at what does a transformed life really look like? What does it mean to be a Christian? What are the principles from Paul's post-conversion experience, his story, that apply to each one of us who say that we're Christians?

Let's find out how belief, belonging, and behavior are changed, are reshaped. Because we belong to Jesus, we say we're Christians.

[7:30] But first of all, a little bit of the background of this story from Acts 9. We should note that Luke actually compresses the story, the timeline. He uses phrases like several days in verse 19, or after many days in verse 23.

But he doesn't give exact dates. He doesn't say how long this period lasts for. But two of Paul's other writings, in Galatians and in 2 Corinthians, we get little glimpses of the same story.

And we can put it all together to fill the chronological gaps. We might also note that we're talking about Saul of Tarsus. That's who Luke refers to him as in this passage.

Up to about chapter 13 in Acts. And then after that, he becomes Paul. Paul the Apostle. Paul was his Roman name, of course, and Saul was his Hebrew name. And it's the same person.

And I might swap and change the names around a little bit, depending on context, as we talk about Saul this morning. Let's piece it together initially from Acts.

[8:29] After his conversion, Saul stayed several days with the disciples in Damascus. And then, he started preaching in the synagogues where the Jews met for worship.

He proclaimed that Jesus is the Son of God. That was his message. Jesus is the Son of God. Verse 20. And as time passed, his arguments grew increasingly powerful.

And he proved that Jesus was the Messiah. So Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the Messiah.

That's what Paul was doing. And eventually, after some period of time, the opposition against him by the Jews in Damascus reached such a crescendo that some of his friends had to help him escape through a hole in the wall.

And he left Damascus and went to Jerusalem. Luke then tells us that, yeah, he went to Jerusalem. And there he attempted to join the Christians in Jerusalem.

But remember, Paul had left Jerusalem sometime before. And he was persecuting the Christians. So they were a bit afraid of him. Was this a trap? Who's this guy that's coming back in? Saul of Tarsus. He's got a pretty bad name in the Christian community.

[9:38] Should we? What's going to happen here? So a really good guy. A senior kind of guy in the church. Barnabas. His name means encourager. He said, this man is genuine.

His conversion is real. God has really entered this man's life and transformed him. You can welcome him. So over a period of time in Jerusalem, Saul met with Cephas.

That's Peter. He met with James, the brother of the Lord Jesus. I'd love to have heard those conversations. Can you just imagine what they sat down and chatted about? And he was welcomed into the community.

But actually, it's from a passage in Galatians that we get the chronology here. And so this is what it says. Then after three years, I went to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him 15 days.

So it's pretty obvious. Three years, he had been north in Damascus or the general vicinity. But his time in Jerusalem only lasted two days.

[10:49] And during those two weeks in Jerusalem, Saul again spoke boldly in the name of Jesus. And he debated with the Hellenistic or Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem. Again, opposition against him intensified.

There was another plot to kill him. That's the second plot now, Damascus and now Jerusalem. And so the Christians in Jerusalem escorted him to Caesarea on the coast where he got a ship and sailed to his hometown, which of course was Tarsus in the province of Cilicia in modern-day Turkey.

It's also from Galatians that we learn that during those years, we don't get it from Luke in Acts, but Galatians tells us that during his time in Damascus, he spent time, an unspecified amount of time, in Arabia.

By Arabia, he means the Nabataean kingdom. And that would be modern-day Jordan and its surrounding regions. Perhaps Petra is the best-known ancient Nabataean city today.

And Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians, so this is piecing it all together, Acts, Galatians 1, 2 Corinthians 11, that he was escaping Damascus from the governor of King Aratas, who was the Nabataean or Arabian king.

[12:10] So putting it together, Paul had upset the Jews in Damascus by preaching that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is the Son of God, and he must have upset the Nabataeans in Arabia somehow as well, because they were chasing him, and they were trying to capture him in Damascus.

So that's when he escaped from Damascus, went to Jerusalem, and spent two weeks in Jerusalem. This map that will appear on the screen shows us basically what happened.

Jerusalem to Damascus, that's with the letters, to persecute the Christians in Damascus, to capture them, imprison them, bring them back, and maybe even kill them in Jerusalem.

He became a Christian on the road to Damascus, stayed with the Christians there, went to Arabia, came back to Damascus. That period of time was three years.

Went to Jerusalem, spent a couple of weeks there, and then eventually, well, not eventually, after two weeks, he's chased out of Jerusalem again, goes to Tarsus through Caesarea, and then it's about another 14 years probably before he went back to Jerusalem.

[13:21] So that's the chronology. That gives us a little bit of the background story. But our focus this morning is to look at Saul's example of conversion and transformation.

There's an overarching principle here, that to be a true Christian, there must be a change in our lives, a change in our beliefs, a change in our belonging, and a change in our behavior.

So we look at belief, first of all. Saul of Tarsus was a zealous Pharisee. He would have won the gold medal for being a zealot Jew, Orthodox Jew, and as a member of the Pharisees.

He regarded Christianity as a dangerous heresy. The Torah, the Jewish scriptures, with the Jewish traditions and observances, were central to his worldview.

Keep obeying God. Do the commandments. Not just the Ten Commandments, but the 623 or whatever number of commandments it is in the Old Testament scriptures. Do all of those, and you'll be right with God, he believed.

[14:35] He thought Jesus was a fraud. A crucified Messiah was impossible in Saul's mind. I mean, who ever heard of the Messiah being crucified, being put to death?

The scriptures told you that was impossible. It said that cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. So how could Jesus of Nazareth possibly be God's anointed one? How could he die under a divine curse?

It was a joke. I mean, nobody believed that your God died on a cross. Nobody believed that the one that God had appointed and anointed to be the Savior would end up crucified by Roman soldiers.

Yet in Damascus, after his conversion, Saul began preaching that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah. Saul's beliefs had changed.

Saul, along with all the other Jews, had expected a Messiah. He knew what the Messiah ought to look like, he thought. He would be a figure of hope, a political liberator for the Jews, a son of David, a king chosen by God who would rule in righteousness and a peaceful kingdom with the Jews elevated once again throughout the world.

[15:59] He would inaugurate that kingdom of justice and prosperity and harmony, and the hated Roman occupiers would be gone. They looked for the Lion of Judah.

And who did they get? They got a slain lamb. They expected the kingdom to be established by violence and force and power.

Instead, it was established through self-sacrificial love. They expected salvation, God's salvation, to be for the Jews, exclusively for them.

And instead, it was international. It was for everyone. It was for the whole world. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. So what changed it for Saul?

What happened? Why did his beliefs change? On the Damascus road, Saul encountered the risen Christ. He became convinced that the crucified Jesus had been vindicated by God through the resurrection.

[17:03] The very fact that disqualified Christ or Jesus in Saul's mind, his crucifixion, was the very thing that became central to his new faith.

This is how one author describes it. F.F. Bruce says, Paul found himself instantly compelled by what he saw and heard. To acknowledge that Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified one, was alive after his crucifixion, vindicated and exalted by God, and was now conscripting him, Saul, into his service. What a radical change. What a transformation had happened. Years later, Paul puts it together when he wrote one of his letters to the believers, the Christian believers in Corinthians, and he said, this is the core of the Christian gospel.

Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures. He was buried. He was raised on the third day. And he appeared to many witnesses, 500 at one time.

He appeared to Peter. He appeared to James. And Paul says, he even appeared to me. I have seen the risen Lord Jesus. My beliefs have changed entirely.

[18:23] This is the message, Paul said, and it's of first importance. Conversion involves a radical reorientation of belief. For Saul, it meant accepting that the crucified one was now the risen Lord.

That salvation comes not through Torah keeping. Not through all those laws, but through Christ's atoning substitutionary death on the cross.

That God's promises are fulfilled. Everything he had read in the Torah, in the Old Testament scriptures, that he had heard from a child growing up, everything is fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Son of God.

Instead of blasphemy in Jesus, Saul saw glory. Instead of deception, he saw truth.

Instead of a curse, he saw redemption. Theologian Alistair McGrath puts it like this. He explains it. Christianity holds that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ have changed things.

[19:37] The created order, and above all, humanity has fallen into disorder. Things are not what they're meant to be, and something has to be done about this.

The same God who made the created order, therefore acts to renew it, and reorder it. The Christian doctrine of sin gives an account of what went wrong.

The doctrine of salvation deals with the restoration of the created order, and humanity to its proper relationship with God. This is what Paul, Saul of Tarsus, now believed.

Everything had changed for him. Becoming a Christian was a radical reversal. For Saul, it changed his beliefs. Jesus had become front and center in his life.

Paul could later write, for me to live is Christ. For me to live is Christ. Jesus Christ was central.

[20:37] It consumed Saul of Tarsus. It consumed Paul the Apostle, and he should. He, the Lord Jesus, should consume our thoughts, our passions, our lives.

So it changed Saul's beliefs. It also changed his belonging, transformed his belonging. Previously, Saul had belonged to the inner circle of the Jewish religious authorities.

He had a mandate from the high priest. His mission to Damascus was to persecute the Christians. He was an enforcer of Jewish orthodoxy. But after his conversion, Saul's allegiance changed.

It shifted completely. Before he was raising havoc among the Christians, now he was one of them. Now he was preaching boldly that Jesus was the Messiah. He even called him Lord.

What a reversal. What a change. In the various letters that Saul, Paul, Paul the Apostle, wrote that we have in our New Testament, over a period of about 20 years, he repeatedly emphasizes this new allegiance.

[21:46] Firstly, Christians belong to Christ. He is Lord and Master of our lives. And then, maybe somewhat surprisingly, Christians also belong to one another, to the community of saints expressed locally in an individual church.

Paul describes it like this in Romans 12, verse 5. In Christ, we though many form one body and each member belongs to all the others.

Let that sink in. Each member belongs to all the others. That's church. That's what it's all about. Christians don't just associate with one another. They organically make up the body of Christ. As Christians, we're interconnected with one another. We're responsible for one another.

We love one another. It's a mutual belonging. It's a communal existence. At first, as we already know, the Christians in Jerusalem were skeptical about him, but Paul, Saul, was invited into that circle of Christians in Jerusalem.

[23:00] And we think that he stayed there at this time for just two weeks. But he identifies openly as a disciple of Jesus, as a follower of Christ. He preached about him.

He got into big trouble for it. They wanted to kill him. His belonging had entirely changed. The last time he was in Jerusalem, he was with the high priest, with the Jewish authorities.

Now, he's with kind of the underground church. church. But he wasn't keeping his head down. He was preaching boldly. And so, he, the persecutor, became the persecuted in Jerusalem.

This new belonging came at a cost to Saul. The Hellenistic Jews wanted him dead. And so, he quickly left for Caesarea and then on to Tarsus.

As we think about belonging, remember that belonging to a church is not the same as belonging to a club. I've got friends who are members of golf clubs or they play bridge with a group of acquaintances or they're part of a running or a hiking group or a theatrical society or a book club, whatever.

[24:11] And they think that I belong to a church in the same way. It's just a group of like-minded people and I spend some time with them on a Sunday morning.

So, that's church. It's like a club. That's what my friends, my non-Christian friends, think. But that's not what this belonging is about at all. Here, it's far more like a family who love one another, who care deeply for one another, who carry one another's burdens, who share their lives together, who show hospitality, who make loving sacrifices for each other, whose lives are embedded together.

That's church. Paul explains this belonging in one of his letters in 1 Corinthians. He says, you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. We rejoice with those who rejoice.

We mourn with those who mourn. That's what community feels like. Belonging to Christ means belonging to his people. Christianity was never designed to be lived in isolation.

[25:22] There's no such thing as a lone ranger Christian. It requires commitment, vulnerability, shared life, mutual care. that's why church membership is so important.

It shows that you have intentionally attached yourself. You belong to this group of people who also belong to Christ. It's why doing church on your own at home, online, doesn't really work.

It's not it. Church was meant to be communal, together, together. We need to invest our lives in each other.

In France now, Florence, my wife, and I host a community group in our home. Actually, I joke that they really only come because Florence is such a good cook and she prepares the meal for them. But it's mostly made up of young people, a little bit like jars of clay when we were here and part of that community group in this church. And the young people in the 20s and 30s, and we know them, we've got to know them and love them.

[26:26] We share meals together, but we also share our lives together. We know about the struggle some of them have as foreigners to get the right visa to live and work in France. We know about how disappointed they are with the state-appointed lawyers who mess up their cases.

We know about the difficulties of being a schoolteacher where you might be threatened in the classroom verbally or even physically by a teenager. We know about the financial worries of some of these young people, the complicated families that some of them come from, their financial troubles that they can barely afford good and proper food.

We know about setbacks in finding jobs, about relationship, heartbreaks. We know about health issues and other everyday matters.

But there are meals together. We pray for one another, together. There's helping out financially. There's hospitality. There's meeting up for coffee or lunch together. There's going to football matches together.

There's going for bike rides together. There's attending graduations and attending baptisms. Why any of this? Why would we bother? Why do we do this? Because when you're a Christian, each member belongs to each other.

[27:45] We belong to all the others. There's a responsibility that we have to one another. Being a Christian involves changing a person's belonging. But it also might mean adversity.

It's not a free ride. Belonging to the community of saints might cause suffering at the hands of others. Maybe family, maybe friends, maybe colleagues treated badly because of your faith. Saul's new identity led to hardship and rejection, danger.

Belonging doesn't guarantee ease, but it does guarantee a shared life with the community of saints and with others who are participating in God's family.

So we've looked at believing, we've looked at belonging, how these are changed, and the third one, the third change is behavior. It shapes becoming a Christian, being a Christian, shapes, reshapes our beliefs our belonging and our behavior.

A few years ago in Hong Kong, I was talking with someone when we realized that we had a mutual friend. The other person asked me how I knew this friend and I said, oh, it's because we go to the same church.

[29:01] And at that point, the reaction of the person that I was talking to was disheartening. She said, oh, I didn't think from his language he'd be the kind of guy that went to church.

I found that sad. Sad because the Christian faith is not just merely intellectual assent. It's a lived transformation.

My behavior, my lifestyle, my language, my attitudes, my reactions are supposed to reflect that I belong to Jesus. Paul wrote, follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.

Christ. The Christian life is one of imitation. We imitate Christ. We reflect Christ's character in our daily conduct.

When your friends and your colleagues and your family look at you, do they see Jesus? Or would they say, they don't look like the kind of person that would go to church.

[30:02] Who do they see when they see you? In Acts 4, verse 13, observers noted that Peter and John, that they had been with Jesus.

Would people say that about me? About you? They've been with Jesus. Previously, Saul had been a violent persecutor of Christians.

Three years later, in Jerusalem, he returns as a bold preacher of Christ. His speech had changed. His goals had changed. His relationships had changed. His identity had changed.

He had changed from the inside out. He was fully committed to Christ, believing that the whole universe revolved around Jesus of Nazareth, Christ, the Son of the living God.

Earlier, Paul had thought that Christ was a heretic, if you like, that he was a fraud. And now he believes everything is centered in Jesus.

[31:16] He said, in Christ lives all the fullness of God, and Christ is all that matters and lives in each one of us. What a change.

Christ is front and center. Christ is everything now for Paul. I live for him. You know, there's possibly, probably, I don't know which, maybe, my favorite verse in the Bible.

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Christ is everything. Christ is in us. He is in everything. He is all and in all. He is the focus.

He, all the fullness of God resides in Jesus Christ. Do I believe in a crucified God? Absolutely. It might be mad, it may be a joke, some people might think it's blasphemous, but my God was crucified.

[32:25] And I believe in him. And I want to tell others about him. And he's alive today. He might have been dead once, but he is alive forevermore.

Christ is all and in all. And so Saul identified with Christ and he wanted to live a life that pleased him. Our behavior matters because we belong to Jesus.

How we speak, how we treat others, how we respond under pressure, it all reflects our allegiance.

Let me explain it like this. My wife Florence probably won't really like this illustration, but it's true.

You know, you see this kind of outside Henry Craig, but my wife and others see someone who doesn't suffer fools gladly.

I can be abrupt with people. I can ignore them. I don't even see them at times, but I have learned from my wife learned from her example because Florence speaks to people in a kind way.

[33:32] She acknowledges people I don't even see, taxi drivers, cashiers, concierges, delivery men, shop assistants, and she doesn't mutter under her breath like I do when other people do silly things in front of her.

And the reason she gives for her behavior is always the same one. I want to be a good witness. I want to be a good witness to my faith in Jesus Christ.

I want to testify to who he is, and I want to reflect the character of Christ and how I behave. A good witness to the fact that Christ reshapes your life.

And so sometimes I do suffer fools gladly. Sometimes my behavior has changed. Why? Because I also want to reflect Christ and I want to be reshaped by him in my behavior.

Conversion and transformation are not about perfection, but they do amount to a direction, a trajectory of your life, a movement toward becoming like Christ.

[34:41] Let's wrap this up. Saul's conversion was unique. It was dramatic. We don't all become Christians the way Saul of Tarsus did.

But the reshaping that followed his life should be a model for each one of us as believers. Saul's life tells us what it ought to look like as a Christian in the period after we become Christians.

Three essentials. New beliefs, trusting in the crucified and risen Christ. New belonging, identifying with Christ and with his people.

new behavior, living in a way that reflects and honors Jesus. You see, many people call themselves Christians because they accept certain truths.

They say they believe in Jesus. They know he died for their sins. Yet their everyday lives tell another story. Christ hardly makes any difference in their choices or their priorities or their desires. [35:45] their faith lives largely in the mind and not in the heart. It's understood but not embraced. They live as practical atheists and call themselves Christians.

Others faithfully attend church. They might even readily identify with some Christian denomination. They belong outwardly. Yet beneath the surface there's no personal trust in God, no quiet assurance that their sins are forgiven.

No vibrant fellowship daily with Jesus. They may belong socially but they still don't have a believing connection. No deep relationship with God or with his people.

So they don't really believe or behave. They just belong. The first group that I mentioned just now, they believe but they don't really belong or behave. And then still others live upright, respectable lives.

They're good people. They're kind, responsible, decent, but they're self-centered and self-reliant. They look to their own goodness for their salvation. They're their own savior. I'm a good person.

[36:54] I don't need church. I don't need anyone else, they say. They behave well but they don't really belong and they don't really have a saving faith in Jesus so they don't really believe.

You see, to be a Christian involves all three. Believing and belonging and behaving. So here's the question today. What has changed in my life because I follow Jesus?

What do I truly believe? Not just in theory but in the deepest part of my being. What would I stake my belief, my life on? What would I be prepared to die for?

I say that I'm a Christian but do I really belong? Do I live as though I'm the center of my own world?

Do I love fellow believers in a tangible costly way?

Is my life intertwined with theirs? And then my behavior, does it reflect that I'm a follower of Jesus?

Am I seeking to please him occasionally or always?

[38:02] Do my beliefs, my belonging, my behavior align? Do they point to the clear conclusion that I have been with Jesus? Conversion to Christianity is a fresh start.

It's a new beginning that continues to transform our beliefs, our belonging, and our behavior.

Christians are those people whose lives are being reshaped by Christ.

It's mine. It's my life being reshaped by Christ. It's yours. Let's pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth, our mouths, and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O God.

And may we ensure as we examine our lives that we believe that we belong and that we behave in a way that shows the image of Christ in our lives.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.