



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Acts 9:1–9

“The Conversion of Saul”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our Scripture reading this morning is Acts chapter 9, verse 1 through verse 9. Our subject is “The Conversion of Saul.” Stephen has just finished his ministry. He has been stoned to death; and as a result of the ministry, the Word of God has begun to go out from Jerusalem. It has penetrated Samaria, through the preaching of Philip. And, now, in Acts chapter 9, we read of the conversion of one of the great enemies of the movement of Christianity in its earliest days. Acts chapter 9 in verse 1.

“And Saul, yet breathing out threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of the way.”

In the Authorized Version, there is the pronoun, the demonstrative pronoun, “this,” but in the Greek text it is the simple definite article.

“If he found any of the way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven. And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, ‘Saul, Saul, why

persecutest thou me?’ And he said, ‘Who art thou, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.’”

Now, some of you may be reading a more modern translation than the one I’m reading and you probably noticed that that last clause, “It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks,” is not in your text. The reason for that is that a number of the ancient manuscripts do not have that clause at this point. However, all of the manuscripts of significance do have it when Paul in chapter 26, defends his conversion and ministry before Agrippa. So it is a part of Scripture; it just is not probably a part of Acts at this point. And we will make reference to it and treat it as if it is Scripture, but you should understand that we are taking the idea from chapter 26 in verse 14. Now, continuing with verse 6.

“And he trembling and astonished said, ‘Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?’ And the Lord said unto him, ‘Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.’ And the men, which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man. And Saul arose from the earth and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink. And there was a certain disciple.”

Well, we’ll save that for next time. We’ll stop our reading at verse 9, and may the Lord bless this reading of his Word. Let’s bow together in a moment of prayer.

[Prayer] Our Heavenly Father, we give Thee thanks for the privilege of reading the Word of God and, especially, of reading the portion that has to do with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, because we know Lord that it is so important for the Christian movement. And we thank Thee and praise Thee for the grace manifested in the conversion of this remarkable man, who has had such a

impact upon the Christian movement. We thank Thee for his faithfulness, for his wisdom, and for his dedication to the Lord, whom he had persecuted, but whom he came to see as Son of God and King of Israel. We pray, O Lord, that as we study the ministry of the Apostle Paul, that we may learn from him the things that will give us fruitfulness in our Christian life, and in our Christian service. We thank Thee, Lord, for the privilege of proclaiming this Word and we pray Thy blessing upon it, wherever it goes forth. Wilt Thou bless richly the preaching of the Word and may the church of Jesus Christ be strengthened and edified and, if it please Thee, multiplied also by additional conversions? Use, O Lord, the Word in the ministry of it today. We thank Thee for our country. We pray Thy blessing upon our president and for those who are with him in our governments, not only in Washington but in Austin and Dallas. And we pray, Lord, that Thou wilt enable us to be citizens of the community of which we are a part, in a way that will bring honor to Thy Name. May, O Lord, the Word of God be used in the lives of those who listen. Supply the needs that exist and we commit Thou the ministries to Thee; the tape ministry and publications and the Bible classes and our Sunday school, and all of the forms of outreach of the Chapel. We pray for the elders and for the deacons and for the members and friends.

And we would, especially, Lord, pray for these who have made requests, concerning friends or family, we ask that Thou wilt answer the petitions that are listed in our Calendar of Concern. And, O God, glorify Thy Name in answer to prayer. We thank Thee for the privilege of bringing our requests to Thee and we thank Thee for the assurance that Thou dost hear us. And, Lord, as we open the Scriptures now, may the exposition be attended with the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit.

We pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

[Message] Outside of our Lord's ministry, the most important event in the history of Christianity may well be Paul's conversion. Perhaps you've noticed in the reading of the New Testament that more space is devoted to it than any other event, except the passion of our Lord.

One can see the crucial nature of it, too, if you simply think of a couple of things; one of which is that humanly speaking, something must be done about Saul, the chief of the Gestapo, if the Christian work is to continue. When you read the early accounts in the book of Acts and how Christianity began to spread, the one figure who stood in the way of its spread was Saul of Tarsus, the man who had advanced in Judaism beyond any of his contemporaries, the Pharisee of the Pharisees, of the tribe of Benjamin, and an enemy of the Christians.

We read in, for example, in chapter 8, verse 1, after Stephen’s stoning to death, that Luke says, “And Saul was consenting to his death.” And in verse 3, “As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.” Later on, when Paul himself describes his conversion in Acts chapter 22, in his defense before the people, in the 19th verse he says, “And I said Lord, they know that I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed on thee.” And then, in his third, in the third description of his conversion in the book of Acts in chapter 26, defending himself before Agrippa, the apostle said, in verse 10 of Acts chapter 26, “Which.” Well, I should read verse 9, too. “I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them.” And, later on in Galatians chapter 1, when Paul is going over his life to show that the only thing that accounts for his life is a revelation from God on the Damascus road. He writes to the Galatians, “For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews’ religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it.”

Humanly speaking, something must be done about this man. We often hear of anti-Semitism, and we justly should decry anti-Semitism down through the years. But there was a very strong movement in the early Judaism of our Lord’s and the apostles’ day to persecute the church of Jesus Christ. And, as Paul says, “Wreak havoc among it and waste it.” And Saul was the leader in this.

“There are two ways in which to deal with your enemy,” someone has said. And the first way is to eliminate them. Stalin eliminated Trotsky, and thus in eliminating Trotsky, he was enabled to carry on the ministry of the leadership of the Soviet Union without an enemy about. The other way is to win over your enemy and God, of course, chose the second, so far as Saul was concerned.

Another thing that marks the cruciality of this event is the fact that it leads to the universal proclamation of the Gospel. Remember, the Lord Jesus Christ’s ministry had been to the nation Israel. He said, and he said this more than once, “He was not sent to the Gentiles, he was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” And the Apostle Paul concurred in that because in the Epistle to the Romans in the 15th chapter, as he is discussing the ministry of the Lord, he says, “Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision, for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers.” The first purpose of the coming of our Lord was to confirm the promises made unto the fathers. And, of course, also, because the promises to the fathers included Gentiles, Paul goes on to say, “And that the Gentiles might glorify God on account of His mercy.”

But Paul becomes the leading figure in the spread of the Gospel among the Gentiles. In fact, taking up his commission to preach the Gospel and bear the name of the Lord before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel, he even calls himself the apostle of the Gentiles. So by heredity, by environment, by language, he was prepared by the Lord God to do the work that, ultimately, leads to the preaching of the Gospel to us.

Let’s look at his conversion. We’ll look at it, first of all, and ask, how did it happen? And we’ll seek to go over the verses and point out some of the important points. And then, we will take a look at what this really meant. What was it, when Paul was converted? And, finally, I’d like to draw a few theological implications from the conversion, on what did it mean doctrinally?

But looking at the description that Luke has given us in Acts chapter 9, verse 1 through 9; we’ll look at it as a simple account first.

“The news of the spread of the gospel had evidently enraged Saul of Tarsus, and so, breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, he went to the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of the way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.”

Campbell Morgan in his comments on the book of Acts has commented that one of the things he would like to do in heaven is to look up these letters that the apostle was given by the authorities to the synagogues in Damascus. He would like to see what became of those letters that the apostle was carrying on his way to Damascus.

I want you to notice an interesting comment that Luke makes in verse 2. He says, “That if he found any of the way.” That expression, “the Way” is a witness to two important things. First of all, that Christianity is the only way to God. It is not called “a way” it is called “the Way.” And even in these early days, it was spoken of by the believers as “the Way.” They were not being arrogant. They were not trying to say, “Others have truth; we have better truth.” They were saying, exclusively that the way to God is through Jesus Christ; and they were saying it simply because this was divine revelation. And being divine revelation, it was simply a question of believing God as over against believing men. So they spoke of Christianity as “the Way.”

We know that the Scriptures affirm this, and confirm it in so many ways, even in the Old Testament we read, “There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof is the ways of death.” And we know, of course, that the Lord Jesus said that he was “The way, the truth and the life, and that no man was to come to the Father except through Him.” So Christianity is the only road to God; so that expression “the Way” teaches. We as I say are not being arrogant and proud when we point that out. We’re not trying to put down other religions, per se. But we are simply seek to say what God has said in his Word. It is the truth. Christianity is the only road to God. The fact that it is called “the way,” also suggests that in Christianity there is the only conduct that is pleasing to God. This is a metaphor of the journey, when we talk about the way or the road, we’re talking

about how we go from one place to another place. And to go from one place to another place is the way. The way to God includes, not only the beginning, through faith in the Lord Jesus, who has died for sinners, but the way to God also includes the other truths that are set out in the Word of God as Christianity. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the Light of life.” So he’s the way. He’s the way in the sense that he’s the road that you must get upon in order to reach the Father. And, also, Christianity is the way, in that it sets forth the path of conduct that is pleasing to the Lord God. The Scriptures make that very plain. Any kind of compromise of that point is not Christianity. It is a denial of the exclusive nature of the claims of the Lord God in Christian truth.

Now, Paul was on his way to Damascus. Damascus is one of the oldest cities on the face of the earth. It was located about a hundred and forty to a hundred and fifty miles from Jerusalem. It took, at that time, five or six days of traveling. The apostle, no doubt, went out of the Damascus gate, accompanied by the temple police, for there were men who went with him, and as they went out, they would pass by the traditional place where Calvary had taken place, where the Lord Jesus had been crucified. One can imagine the apostle going a little bit slower there, and raising his fist, perhaps, pointing over at Calvary and saying, “You deceiver. You will see who will really ultimately conquer.” And then, he had gone on, making his journey up. And, finally, as he came over the slopes of Hermon, and looked down upon the city of Damascus, which was located in a plain, usually very green because of the rivers that came down from Mount Hermon. And the houses, being very white, it has often been called, “A handful of pearls in a goblet of emerald.” “It was about noon,” Paul will say, in one the other accounts, and the sun’s rays were, no doubt, extremely hot, piercing like swords.

And Luke says, “As he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven.” Was this lightening? Or was it light alone? Was it the glorified face of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ? Well, of course, we cannot speak with dogmatism. We know that later on, Paul describing what took place said in chapter 26 in verse 13, “At mid day, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and

them which journeyed with me.” And in the light of the fact that the transfiguration of the Lord Jesus is described in a similar way, as a brightness that was above the brightness of the sun, it’s likely, it seems to me, that Luke is simply describing the appearance of the glory of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

It’s not surprising that Saul and the other men were immediately thrown to the ground. They were, no doubt, terrified by what had taken place. Reminding one, of Luther’s experience, when as he was traveling near Arafat, a storm came and he finally fell over into a ditch. And, of course, speaking out of the faith that he had that time, before he had come to rest his life upon the Lord Jesus, he cried out, “Help, dear Ann, I will become a monk.” And he describes the beginning of his monkery as being that experience. Well, this experience was, no doubt, a similar kind of experience; but much more deep and much more significant. And, finally, when Paul fell to the earth, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” Saul had thought he was fighting a megalomaniac; but you’re not fighting a megalomaniac, our Lord said, “You are fighting the march of God through human history. And when you persecute my saints, you are persecuting me. Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?”

You see, our Lord taught and it has been confirmed down through the years, that those who are related to him form one body with him. He is the head, they are the members. In fact, an old divine has said, “Saul was persecuting the body of Christ on earth and the head complained from heaven.”

So our Lord says, “Why are you persecuting me?” Some have even suggested, there may be some truth to it, that Paul derived his knowledge of the body of Christ from this experience; as he reflected upon it, he realized that this union of believer with the Lord was expressed in that opening statement. “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” He might well have said, “I’ve not been persecuting you,” and our Lord would have replied from heaven, “But you have been persecuting my disciples and they are united to me. And so in persecuting them you persecute me.”

Paul at this point, we have no indication, incidentally, that Paul was ever concerned to consider the claims of Jesus as if they were genuine. But, now, he replies, “Who art thou, Lord?” and, it’s obvious that he’s reached the stage where he might be willing to be taught, for he says, “Who art thou, Lord?” As we say, the Lord God had begun to jiggle his “willer” at this point. And so he asks, “Who art thou, Lord?” Now that, of course, is a question of an earnest enquirer, after the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. One could reply, “Well, Paul I am the prophet of God. I’m the one that Moses prophesied about and I tell you the truth about God.” Or, the Lord Jesus could have replied, “I am the priest, the priest, all of the priests beforehand looked forward to me. And I have offered the blood sacrifice which cleanses sinners from their sins.” And he also could have said, “I am the King who is to come and exercise ministry over the earth.” And Paul, the place of an individual before I exercise my ministry upon the earth is to be submissive to me. And so the apostle, after he has asked, “Who art thou, Lord?” asking for some good doctrinal information; the Lord Jesus says, “I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.”

Now, in chapter 22 in verse 8, I believe we may safely add the words, “I am Jesus, the Nazarene,” an identification with the specific historical character of the Lord Jesus. What an eruption in the thinking of the apostle. What an eruption. What a revolution, one might say, in the life of Saul of Tarsus. What an upheaval. You can imagine the apostle-to-be saying in reply, “You died on a gallows in a poor and insignificant country, and world history has stridden over you.” But our Lord would have replied, “No. I have stridden over world history. And I have come from the grave; I am alive forevermore, and the keys of Hell and Hades are in my hands.”

Now, the apostle, after he has said, “Who art thou, Lord?” and Jesus has said, “I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest, it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.” The apostle then, trembling and astonished, said, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” That’s the other question that Christians should ask. Everybody should ask the question, Who art thou, Lord? And, receiving the answer of Holy Scripture that he is the prophet, the priest, the king, promised by the Lord God, the eternal God, savior of sinners. Then the next question, my Christian friends, and the only question that it is

proper for us to ask is, “What wilt thou have me to do?” And the apostle for the remainder of his life spends his time in an affirmative answer to that question, What wilt thou have me to do?

Submissiveness to the Lord Jesus is the only logical thing for one who has acknowledge him as Lord.

Well, Luke goes on to describe how the apostle was blind by this encounter with the Lord. He was led into Damascus, a captured soul, as later on he himself describes it. He was apprehended by the Lord Jesus. We would say, arrested by the Lord Jesus, on the Damascus road. And he went into the city. For three days he was without sight. He didn't eat nor drink, as he sought to take stock of things, to find the balance of things. Perhaps, even, to see himself passing through identified with the Lord, the three days of our Lord's death, burial and resurrection.

Now, we ask the question, What was the interpretation of the conversion of Paul? What is meant by it? Some years ago, in *The Wall Street Journal*, on the editorial page, there was a cartoon of a man who was obviously the boss of the company, being encountered by one of his employees, who was a rather simple looking fellow. But he's come in with a bunch of papers, which obviously don't tell good news, but bad news, to the boss. And he's pointing to the paper and the boss is saying, “Don't try to explain it. I'm having enough trouble understanding it.” And so one thinks of the many ways in which Paul's conversion has been understood by those who sought to speak about it.

Perhaps, the most famous attempt to understand it was the attempt of Lord Littleton, a very famous man. He was one of the greatest of the English statesmen of the 17th century, George Littleton. And he speaks about how he, as a young man, had not paid any attention to Christianity; he had had a lot of corrupt friends and he had spent his time with them. But when he came to some measure of maturity, he thought that it was proper for him to investigate Christianity now and really find out about it. And so he did. He applied himself seriously to the question and he centered his attention upon the conversion of the Apostle Paul, because he thought that if you could demonstrate that the conversion of the Apostle Paul was a genuine thing then Christianity would be shown to be a divine revelation. He later on wrote a book on observations on the conversion of Saint Paul, a treatise

which in fidelity has never been able to answer. And he found as a result of his study of the conversion of Paul that it was truly a conversion in a miraculous way.

But, many different attempts have been made to explain it. Some have said, “it’s just fraud.” H. L. Minkin said, “It was just fraud.” But when you look at the apostle and think about the motives that he might have had for deceiving people about his conversion. Did he like power? Would he have some measure of power if he might be converted to Christianity? Was he seeking some power? Well, think of it, Paul is a man who is already a powerful man in Israel. And, furthermore, he says in one of his letters, and we have no reason to doubt it, that he had advanced in Judaism beyond his contemporaries. He was already a Pharisee of the Pharisees, a very important man, the chief instigator of the persecution against the Christians. He was not seeking power.

Now, of course, you might say, well, he was seeking wealth. How foolish. Why they didn’t even know about prosperity theology then. Prosperity theology has been the cause of the corruption of a great deal of Christian thinking in Christian ministry today. Believe it or not, I know that some of you don’t think I read what charismatics write, but I do. This past week, I read an article in *Pneuma*, which is the scholarly journal of the Pentecostal movement. There is an article in it by Charles Farrar, who is professor of Systematic Theology and Historical Theology, at Oral Roberts University. It is a very strong attack on the charismatic movement.

Now, I must say, for Professor Farrar that his convictions concerning the charismatic movement are, probably, genuine. He doesn’t say anything about it in the letter and I assume that he still holds those convictions. But what he attacks is what ought to be attacked, and that is prosperity theology. And he goes on in a very strong article. I’m going to give it to Howard Prier. He needs to read it. And a few other of my friends; they need to read it, too. But, it’s a very, very interesting article and a very true article in which and, incidentally, it’s not simply the charismatic movement that is affected by this, don’t misunderstand. The whole evangelical movement today is affected by prosperity theology. That is, if you’re really in the will of God, you’ll be rich. You’ll drive a Mercedes. You’ll have at least one home, probably three, one on the lakes in order to enjoy fishing, one in the

mountains in order to enjoy your skiing, and you will have the finest of every kind of thing. And you will also have a long string of holdings in your portfolio.

And you may even have all of the other things that go with the trappings of the beautiful life because you are a believer walking in the will of God. Prosperity is what God has promised us Christians. Can you believe that? Can you believe that the Apostle Paul is a man who converted from Judaism to Christianity, in order that he might become rich? Listen to what was said to him. If he had that idea; he would have reconverted very quickly, because the Lord said unto him, verse 15 and 16, “Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and the kings and the children of Israel.” And, now, “For I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake.”

Christians have never been promised prosperity. They’ve been promised suffering. They’ve been promised that they will have a difficult time. They’ve been promised that they will be unpopular. They’ve been promised that the things that they believe will be rejected by the world. They’ve never been promised prosperity. The apostle never looked for prosperity. He gloried in the things that he suffered, for the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. How can we be so foolish, as to believe prosperity theology? Paul’s conversion is no fraud. He had everything to lose by being converted and nothing, humanly speaking, to gain. So we reject that theory.

Others have said, giving a form of what may be called rationalistic theory that the apostle only had hallucinations caused by a clap of thunder and a flash of lightning. That’s what one of the greatest of the French theologians and philosophers said. But Paul had no sign of that kind of weakness that would subject him to hallucinations. He was not subject to nervous disorders, so far as we know. And, Philip Schaff, the great church historian, has, I think, the most effective answer to it. He said, “Who ever heard the thunder from heaven speak in Hebrew or any other articulate language?” And, later on, Paul will say that he heard the voice from heaven speaking in Hebrew. Thunder doesn’t speak in Hebrew. If it did, it would speak in English and with a Southern accent. [Laughter] But we don’t have that kind of speech, as you well know. So their idea of a rationalistic

theory is ridiculous. Others have said it was a subjective vision only; that is, Paul saw the things that were happening, and it was a vision that he had, but it was not an objective thing at all. Paul, it is said, had growing doubts about the path of life that he was following and that he began to ask himself the question, was this Jesus really the Messiah? And as he thought about it, then there arose on the way to Damascus, there arose before the mind of Paul, the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, and the vision that he had was only a subjective vision.

Now, the apostle stresses in the accounts of his conversion the fact that this was not something that grew with him. As a matter of fact, it was just the opposite. He stresses the fact that he was arrested on the road to Damascus. It was something that came suddenly.

We should not think of the Apostle Paul, one of the students of Paul's conversion says, “As like a man in a boat, who's trying to reach a harbor in the midst of a storm and suddenly there is a big wave that manages to get him over the last barrier. And he reaches the harbor by that last magnificently large wave that pushes him in; and he's been trying all along.” No, this man says, “We need to think of Paul as making for one harbor and finding another harbor entirely.” That's what the New Testament tells us about the conversion of the Apostle Paul. It was a supernatural conversion.

Now, you might say, well, did he not kick against the pricks? Yes, he did. There were goads. Those were the things that the Lord sought to try to turn him from his way. But Paul was not turning, until finally, efficacious grace worked in his conversion. Men resist the grace of God; and even Christians resist the grace of God. But efficacious grace cannot be resisted successfully. God works, finally, and jiggles the willer of the apostle and the apostle wills to believe and comes into the family of the faithful, in a supernatural way. It was a supernatural conversion.

Now, Matthew Arnold and others, including most recently Rudolf Bultmann of Marburg, believe that miracles just do not happen. Our universe is a closed universe; and everything works by natural law. But that's a human opinion, not a divine opinion. And we know from the Word of God that it is very unscientific for a scientist to say everything works by natural law because he's never tested the things that should enable him to make a statement like that. His induction is incomplete.

So I conclude that this was a supernatural conversion; it had an objective reality to it as well as a subjective reality, as well. And when we read the other accounts of Paul’s conversion, we will see this. The Lord Jesus really appeared to the apostle. But it made a tremendous transformation within him. It was a revelation and produced a revolution within him. An external appearance of our Lord was the vehicle of the inward revelation.

Now, let me conclude by asking, what did it mean to Paul? Well, first of all, we may conclude from this that Paul was the object of divine election. Ah, you say, I knew he was going to say that. I knew he was going to say it. Well, of course I’m going to say it. It’s in the Bible. It’s right here in this passage. You were thinking, he was going to bring it in. No. It’s right here. It’s always there; the problem is we don’t read it or we pass by it. Look at verse 15. The Lord is talking to Ananias. He says, “Go thy way: for he is an elect vessel unto me.” So he was chosen to perform a particular task. And Paul is the object of divine election.

Now, I want to stress this because, you know, I think that when a person like me talks about it so much, sooner or later, some of you in the audience are going to develop a very thick hide. And so every time I say it you don’t respond to it. Now, that’s natural for us men. I do that, too. If somebody tells me something about twenty-five times, when the twenty-sixth time comes, the chances are I don’t hear it at all. Because, well, I’ve heard it before, so I don’t hear it any more. But this is something we need to keep hearing.

Let me remind you, how the apostle addresses his letters. He says, “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, through,” if you read the Bible, you already know what he so often says, “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, through the free will of man.” [Laughter] I’m glad there are some of you laughing. Some of you are puzzled. “Through the free will of man?” Why not? Why does he never say that? Because that is a fictitious doctrine. It’s not true. He says, “Through the will of God.” He is an apostle through the will of God. More than once he says that. He keeps saying it. I can hear all those people say, when he starts his letter, “There goes Paul again, talking about divine election.” Well, thank you, Paul. When I get to heaven, I want to sit on the front row of church with you; because I believe that

doctrine. And, I think, it’s also something that we need to keep before us constantly, because it reminds us of God’s grace in our salvation.

Now, another thing that this incident illustrates is that the Lord Jesus is the conqueror of death because Paul thought of him as a person they had put to death. His followers were still around but he was dead. But when he encounters the Lord on the Damascus road and he hears this voice from heaven saying, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” and he says, “Who art thou, Lord?” I don’t know whether that means Lord or Sir, but let’s say, Lord. “Who art thou, Lord?” And the Lord says, “I am Jesus, the Nazarene, whom thou art persecuting.” And the apostle came to the conviction then that Jesus was the conqueror of death. O, how important it is, my dear friends, to be right about our Lord’s death. And how terrible it is to be mistaken about Christ’s death. To think that he died, and that he does not live. That’s the greatest mistake that any person could ever make. To be wrong about our Lord, to be wrong about his ministry, to be wrong about his life, his death, his burial, his resurrection is the greatest error that anyone could possibly make. And the apostle, by the grace of God, is brought to the conviction that Jesus of Nazareth is the conqueror of death.

And I say to you, in the audience, if you are here today, and you have never believed in our Lord Jesus Christ, and are mistaken about him and his life and ministry, you are mistaken about the most important thing in human life. May God bring you to a conviction that he is the conqueror of life. And then one other thing, he is the Messiah, of course. And, therefore, the claims of him and the claims of his followers are vindicated in the fact of his resurrection. I think that the apostle could have reasoned, too that Jesus died vicariously; that is, as a substitute because he died on a cross, and he was hanging upon a cross.

Now, the apostle knew the Old Testament very well and he knew particularly this text. That in Judaism or in the Old Testament truth, when a body was hanging upon a cross that was the sign that it was under a curse. And that’s very plain from Deuteronomy 21:23. “Cursed is everyone that hangeth upon a tree.”

And later, the apostle will say, “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law being made a curse for us. For it is written, cursed is everyone that hangs on a tree.” And so as he reflected upon the fact that the Lord Jesus, the Messiah, the one who conquered death hung upon a tree as a curse, he would inevitably come to the conclusion He did not hang there for his own sins. And, since he conquered death, he didn’t have to hang there, and he didn’t have to die. The fact that he did hang there and he did submit to death, as the eternal one submitting to death is evidence of the fact that that was purposeful. He was accursed purposefully; that is, he became accursed that others might be delivered from their sin. He had a deep sense of the unspeakable grace of God. He saw that God was now ‘no angry God sitting upon a rainbow.’ As Luther said he used to think of God; but he was a lavish giver.

Helmut Thielicke has made, I think, one of the finest statements ever made by a preacher. Talking about the fact that preachers, particularly, need to know the grace of God, and that God is a lavish giver. Thielicke who was for many years a professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Hamburg, in Germany, and a preacher in the cathedral there regularly, known perhaps as the greatest preacher in Germany. Thielicke, Professor Thielicke, is still living but has retired. He says in one of his works, “And I make bold to say that even the most orthodox churchmen will not enter the kingdom of heaven unless he has continually surprised that mercy has been shown to him.” [I] love that. Even the orthodox churchman shall not reach heaven, unless he is continually surprised that mercy has been shown to him. That’s particularly true of preachers; but it’s true of the rest of us, as well. Paul, from this point on, had a deep sense of the unspeakable grace of God. That’s why he says, “Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift.”

He had a clear view of the inadequacy of religion, for he discovered that religion does not save. He had the greatest of all religions, divinely revealed. Judaism. No other religion divinely revealed except Judaism. Judaism has been divinely revealed. No liturgy can compare with Judaism. No ceremony can compare with the ceremonies of Israel. The Day of Atonement; what a

magnificent thing that must have been to observe. Judaism divinely revealed. But the apostle discovers the inadequacy of religion, when it's time of usefulness has passed by.

Some years ago, in *The Dallas Morning News*, there was a sermon title by one of the local preachers, and it read like this, “Enter Jesus Christ, Exist Religion.” And I looked at that and I thought, now, that's strange. “Enter Jesus Christ, Exist Religion.” And I felt that that was a mistake. That was a typographical error. I think that what that preacher intended, because he was an evangelical preacher, was “Enter Jesus Christ, Exit Religion.” But, I think, that some fellow, down at *The Dallas Morning News* in the religion department, looking at that title said, “That cannot be true. ‘Enter Jesus Christ, Exit Religion.’ Why, when Jesus Christ comes, religion doesn't go.” And so casting around for a possible typographical explanation, he said, “Ah, I've got it. ‘Enter Jesus Christ, Exist Religion.’ The church secretary forgot the ‘s’.” And so that's the way it appeared in the paper. It was really intended to be, “Enter Jesus Christ, Exit Religion,” for when Christ comes, human religions go. And in Paul's case when Christ came, even the only revealed religion, since it had past it's time of usefulness, by our Lord's cross, exited for the apostle. And he had a solemn sense of the divine call to ministry. Formerly, he had tried to win the empire for Moses; now he will seek to win the four corners of the earth for Jesus Christ. As Keble put it, “As to Thy last apostle's heart, thy lightning glance did then impart, zeal's never dying fire.” And the apostle never had anything but an undying fire to proclaim Christ, from this time on.

By the way, when he said, “Who art thou, Lord?” and the Lord said, “I am Jesus, the Nazarene,” he didn't say, “What wilt the church have me to do?” It's, “What wilt Thou have me to do?” He didn't say, “What will the prayer book have me to do?” He didn't even say, “What will the confession of faith have me to do?” He didn't say, “What will my wife have me to do? Or, my husband have me to do? Or what would my friends have me to do? Or what will my preacher have me to do?” It's, “What wilt Thou have me to do?” And so as Christians, we follow the Word of God.

You know tonight, we're having a baptismal service in Believers Chapel and I was reading last night, somewhat late, a sermon by Mr. Spurgeon on Acts 9. And a few little things from it have

come into my message this morning, though I haven't made any special attempt to follow him. But I noticed one thing in this sermon, which I had read before but I'd completely forgotten.

Mr. Spurgeon was a person who grew up in a preacher's home. He grew up in a Congregational home. His grandfather was a great preacher. And then his father was also a preacher. And when he was born because his mother was very young, he was farmed out to his grandparents. And so he grew up with them though he did not become a Christian then. But he was very influenced by him. And when he became a Christian, Mr. Spurgeon goes on to say, that he had never heard of the necessity of being baptized by immersion. It's amazing that he grew up in this English town, in a Congregational church, small town, evidently, there were no Baptists around.

He said, “I didn't even know that there were any Baptists around. I did not even know that there was such a thing as baptism by immersion. But, when I was converted, I determined to study the Scriptures about baptism.” He said, “I read the New Testament through, and it was clear to me from reading the New Testament through that I as a Christian should be baptized, and that I should be baptized by immersion.” Now, he tells some reasons why. It is not necessary for the point I want to make. And the point that he wanted to make. The point that he wanted to make was this: that when he was converted, the one thing that God enabled him to do, and he had sought to do for the rest of his life was, “What wilt Thou have me to do?” and he'd sought to positively do just that. And he said, “Though I had never heard of baptism by immersion, though I didn't know any Baptists at all, I saw from reading the Scriptures that that is what I must do. And so I went out and I was baptized by immersion.” And he said that, “By God's grace, I've sought to follow the Word of God in that way, through my ministry.” He goes on to admit that he has failed a number of times, but the question, “What wilt Thou have me to do, is the kind of question that should concern us, constantly, as believers.

May I just close by saying this; there were other people who were there when Paul had this great experience. How would you feel if in the ages of eternity to come in the fires of eternal separation from God, you should be one of those soldiers who was with the Apostle Paul and realize

that you had been in the presence of, perhaps, the second greatest event for the ongoing of Christianity and all that had happened was that you were knocked to the ground by the light, stood up, heard some sounds, and it made no difference whatsoever to you? How would it be to sit in the presence of the preaching of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, Sunday after Sunday, hear the grace of God proclaimed, and not respond to it? What a tragedy! What a mistake! May God deliver us from that?

Let's stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Our Heavenly Father, we are grateful to Thee for the Word of God and for the marvelous way in which Thou hast dealt with Saul of Tarsus and made him Apostle of Jesus Christ. And we thank Thee for the magnificent understanding of the grace of God that Thou didst give to him, and we pray that we too may follow in his steps as he has followed in Thine. If there should be some here, Lord, who have never turned to our Savior, who loved sinners and gave Himself for them, may they at this very moment flee to Him, and ask Him, “What wilt Thou have me to do?” for the rest of their lives.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.