

## **The Conversion of Saul, a Pharisee**

### **Acts 9:1-30**

Acts tells how the gospel began to change the world. But to change the world you have to change hearts. Hearts must be converted.

#### **The Problem with Religion**

Luke reminds us how Saul unleashed a flood of persecution against the church. Why did an educated, intelligent man behave in such a way?

One answer is that he was a conservative traditionalist, who opposed anything that threatened his tradition. But in addition Saul was a Pharisee. In terms of the Old Testament Law, he thought he was faultless. He was sorted.

That is the problem with religion. When we think that our standing with God, and our worth, is based on our moral achievement, and we think we *are* achieving, then it can make us proud. Then we begin to look down on others who don't make the grade, as being less worthy, and (in subtle ways) oppress them.

But this is also a problem with atheism, and pluralistic secularism. And we see it played out in the work-place. It is the problem of the human heart: from a sense of our own superiority, or inadequacy, we put others down and we fail to love them as God calls us to.

#### **The Answer of Grace**

Saul does not save or change his own heart. Instead when Saul is at his worse, out of love and grace God intervenes to save him. It is the divine initiative of grace. It is this grace that undermines religious pride, because we can never say, 'I did it!'

But there is also the divine roadblock of grace, when God brings us to a full-stop, and confronts us with himself, and we see ourselves as we really are. Jesus brings Saul to rock-bottom, and in conversion and at other times he will do the same with us, not to humiliate us, but because he loves us and wants to change us. He must first bring us down before he can lift us up, and that's what happened to Saul.

But if grace is the answer to religious pride, it also makes men brave.

#### **The Courage of the Gospel**

##### ***Courage for Love***

It was knowing Jesus' love for himself, that gave Ananias the courage to risk, and visit Saul, and call him brother. The gospel gives us the courage to love the undeserving.

##### ***Courage for Forgiveness***

Barnabas accepts and forgives Saul when others turned away. When we understand the price Jesus paid for our forgiveness, we will find the courage to forgive those who have hurt us.

##### ***Courage for Suffering***

As Jesus said he would, Saul suffers for Jesus' name. We can find the same courage to speak up for Jesus, even if it costs us, when we realize how Jesus suffered for us.