

Iain Macritchie: Acts 9

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Preacher: Guest Preacher

[0 : 0 0] If we could turn back to God's word as we find it in the portion of scripture that we read together Acts chapter 9 and I'd like to look at this portion together but we can if we're going to take a text we could maybe focus our attention on the words that we find in verses 3 and 4. Now as he went on his way he approached Damascus and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him and falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? I wrote to Damascus conversion I'm sure that that's something that many of us have or perhaps are looking for in our lives and here tonight in our fourth encounter with Christ we see yet another life that is completely transformed beyond all recognition an encounter that is perhaps one of the most famous encounters with Christ in the whole Bible a testimony that is just as relevant to us here tonight as it was when it took place on that road so many years ago here we have then the testimony of Saul on the road to Damascus. Now for a short time I'd like us to look at the events that we have before us here just under three simple headings persecution, power and proclamation persecution, power and proclamation. Firstly then let's think about persecution as we find it in the text before us and we see here Saul of Tarsus now Saul of Tarsus later became known as Paul and he was a man that at this point in his life was known for his extreme hatred towards any follower of Christ he was a Pharisee who studied under one of the most respected rabbis of his day Gamaliel one who would have strived to keep the law every last letter of the law he would have been an extremely religious man a man who would have dotted his eyes and crossed his t's as far as the law was concerned but yet sadly he didn't know the giver of the law he couldn't see Christ for who he was himself he thought that Christ was a blasphemer that he was a troublemaker he thought he was one who was causing schisms in the church and consequently we see in Saul a man who was absolutely intent on putting a stop to anyone no matter who they were male or female who followed Christ now in chapter seven of Acts we don't know if you remember we can see that Stephen the one who was described as a man full of grace and power who was doing great wonders and signs among the people of God he was stoned he was stoned to death because of his testimony because of the fact that he was a follower of Christ and following Stephen's execution we find Saul guarding the robes of those who were involved with the stoning this suggests that he was deeply involved with the whole affair that he had something to do with his execution and shows us the hatred that he had for the Lord's people he then went on

to be the mastermind the ringleader if you like for that persecution that broke out following the death of Stephen and this was something that consumed Saul his whole life was set upon hunting down and eliminating the Lord's people we read here that in verse one that he was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples that's just speaking about all of the followers of the Lord he was breathing out threats and murder against them this this was something that was continuing not that he breathed out he was breathing it was ongoing day after day after day he wanted them removed he wanted them eradicated he wanted them dead the commentator suggests that we're able to get a handle on the kind of the kind of vengeance that Saul had for God's people by this term breathing out murderous threats the original language the Greek would suggest that this was this breathing it was almost like the panting of of some kind of wild beast and so we have before us here the picture of a man who is completely out of control a man who who just like a bull is ready to charge against any follower of Christ that he can lay his hands on and so when he finds out that there is another group of believers to be found in Damascus he makes it his business to to deal with them and to persecute them in any way that that he would find necessary but what he could do so he would have to find and receive permission from the high priest the one who was the the president at this time of the Sanhedrin he would have to to get permission from him so that he could go into the synagogues in Damascus and to drag back bound men and women who we read were found to be belonging to the way now the word the phrase the way here comes from Christ because Christ is the way the truth and the life so anyone who was belonging to the way was basically anyone who was belonging to Christ so then we hear we have the picture of a wicked man a man who could almost be called an animal with his desire to to subject the Lord's people with untold cruelty and if necessary death but in persecuting Christ's followers the fact is that Saul was persecuting Christ himself we read later on Saul Saul why are you persecuting me any persecution that's fired at the Lord's people whether that be physical or verbal is fired at the Lord Jesus

Christ himself whether this is by running down the character of a believer or by mocking them or their Christianity this is indeed a direct attack on Christ himself now that's a thought for us isn't it perhaps we have had a bad thought or word to say about a believer about their faith about the God that they follow and in doing so we're directly attacking Christ himself I wonder if you are a persecutor of Christ now no doubt that very question might make you feel uneasy tonight the fact that I've asked that question how dare I ask are you a persecutor of Christ you are here in church with a desire in your heart to worship Christ of course you're not a persecutor of Christ well let me ask you another question who is it that is sitting on the throne of your heart is it Christ is he at the very center of your affections is it him that you live for each and every day of your life does he take the highest position in your life with everything else taking a much lower place well if the answer is no the reality is that you are a persecutor of Christ now that is a really bold statement for me to make and and let me qualify it let me let me explain what I mean because there is no neutrality when it comes to following Christ scripture tells us that we are either for him or we are against him as part of a sermon on the mount Jesus commends us not to lay up for ourselves treasure on earth not to live for the things of the world but rather to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven he says that where our treasure is there also our heart will be we cannot serve two masters because either we will hate one and love the other or we will be devoted to the one and despise the other where is your heart tonight friends is your treasure in heaven or are you taken up with earthly things that will pass away who is your master who is it that you serve who is it that that motivates you each and every day to get out of bed and face life is it Christ or is it yourself friends there is no middle road but by nature we are all persecutors of Christ you and I all of us because every day we sin against him in thought in word and in action we were conceived as scripture tells us in guiltiness and sin we have attracted to sin like metal to a magnet and so far sins aren't covered by the precious blood of the lamb we just like Saul are persecuting him daily in our hearts.

Saul did all the outward things that were to be commended all the the lawful things that were demanded of him but sadly just to quote the hymn he was still a stranger to grace and to God he didn't know his danger he didn't feel his load I wonder tonight as you sit here as you you come to church so diligently and it's lovely to see you please keep coming but I wonder do you realize that there has to be something more and so with this man Saul made his way to Damascus he was fired up and ready to to cause havoc in the lives of the believers that he would find there little did he know that that his plans would come to an abrupt halt which takes us on to our second point power power because just as his men were making their way to Damascus they were nearly there they were all fired up with this mission to to sort out these followers of Christ when suddenly a light flashes all around them now acts 22 verse 6 tells us that this was the middle of the day the sun would have been at its hottest and brightest so any light that would eclipse this would have to be a supernatural light this was a light from heaven and this was a man who had been so sure of himself he was so sure of the direction that he and his men were taking that morning when he left and he was he was so fired up to to ferociously fight against the gospel of Christ but in an instant in the blink of an eye he's brought to his knees Saul is here stopped in his tracks he's absolutely no control of what's happening to him now and falling to the ground we read he heard a voice saying to him Saul Saul why are you persecuting me as well as this bright light around him he heard a voice from heaven a voice of the voice of Christ himself this was an emphatic voice a personal voice Saul

Saul why are you persecuting me now if you've not been with us over the the previous weeks we've been going through a series entitled encounters with Christ we've been looking at various different encounters that various people in the New Testament have had with Christ but if you have been with us you'll notice that there's a pattern emerging in our series because each and every person who's had an encounter with Christ has been addressed so personally and directly by him you know when God wants to get our attention he will no matter what we try to do to avoid him when we are so blatantly as Saul was on the wrong road though we probably won't see flashing lights from heaven the Lord can so easily stop us in our tracks to bring us to our knees dear friends what is it going to take for you to to hear and to respond to God's voice here as it's found in the gospel and so at this point we might expect Christ to this voice from heaven to to deal with Saul and his men by by striking Saul dead surely this is all he deserved that he will be struck dead to prevent him from attacking any more of his people but that's not what happens because what happens here is Saul is made to realise in that moment of weakness and vulnerability that there is indeed something bigger a force far more powerful than him at work and in control of not only the world but his life and he said in verse 5 who are you Lord and he said I am Jesus whom you are persecuting but rise and enter into this city and you will be told what you will do I am Jesus once again Christ reveals himself and you know this is the greatest miracle of all we read of so many miracles in scripture we read of

[16:20] Jesus turning the water into wine we read of the seas being parted so that the Israelites can make their way through we read of Lazarus being raised from the dead we read of the storms being calmed all these things to us if we were to see them happening today we would think they were the most miraculous things ever but you know here before us we have the greatest miracle of all that is a sinner being saved by grace a sinner being taken from darkness into light from their eyes being opened so that they can see Jesus for themselves this is the greatest miracle this is a supernatural occurrence it's a life changing occurrence because here a heart of stone is turned into a heart of flesh in college with learning Greek amongst other subjects next year God willing it will be

Hebrew but in first year we are learning Greek there are so many words in Greek to learn I have to be honest and say that I struggle to learn some of those words but I have my own little ways of remembering what they mean now the word for spirit is new ma now the way that I remember this word is because the word pneumatic comes from the word new ma as in a pneumatic drill when you think about what a pneumatic drill does you can almost relate that to the work of the spirit because a pneumatic drill it breaks down rocks breaks down the hardest of rocks down to nothing and isn't that what the spirit of God does it breaks down the hardest of hearts of men and women and boys and girls in a way that nothing else can I mean who else could have or what else could have brought Saul to this place of dependence and submission to God himself other than the spirit but this is what the Holy Spirit does he convicts he convinces he converts and it's God alone that's able to bring about this miracle of grace in our lives but you know he can do it all the hardest of hearts in carloy all the hardest of hearts in here tonight in this very church these hearts that might not have any room in them for Christ his spirit the new mother the spirit can can break down these hard hearts softening them and turning them to Christ so that their hearts of flesh this friends is the creator of the heavens and the earth we've enjoyed so much lovely weather tonight it's raining that has been ordained by the Lord himself nothing happens just by accident nothing is too difficult for him and no heart have touched on this before in the previous week no heart is so hard that his spirit cannot penetrate so all is then instructed to rise and enter the city so that he will told what to do so he's been brought to his knees he's been brought to that low low place now by the spirit of

God he's asked to rise now it's at this point we see how the whole experience affects the men that are with him did they see the light did they hear this voice of God we read in verse 7 that they stood speechless hearing the voice but seeing no one and later we read in acts 22 verse 9 Saul who was now called Paul by this point was speaking when speaking of of the men who were with him said that they saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking they saw the light but did not understand the voice during times of revival even in our own district here in Carlyway it's true to say that many people were saved and affected in a in a big way by the Holy Spirit but there were also those who weren't saved those people who didn't come to know Christ but yet records show that they were affected by the presence of God not in a saving way but like these men they they knew about this light and his voice about the power of the word of God speaking but they weren't able to to lay hold of it for their own their own salvation that's how it is for for unsaved people that might be how it is for you in here tonight you're aware of the things of God you read his word diligently day by day you come to church and you pray you see how the power of God has affected the lives of so many people you know but yet you still can't recognize the Lord has been your own strength and life you don't know what it is to come before him as a child before his father you can't lay hold of the power of God in your own experience but don't you want to don't you want to be able to see the light maybe your husband or your wife can see through the eyes of faith don't you want to intimately know that saving power of of the God that perhaps your parents or your grandparents knew and loved so much don't you even tonight where she tells us that Saul rose from the ground as I said but I think it's fair to say that as he rose he rose a completely different man to the man he was when he had been brought to his knees he'd met with Jesus and he'd been transformed by the power of God and this has been the testimony of so many of the Lord's people through the years it might be your testimony here tonight you were brought to that place of submission perhaps not physically on your knees but brought to that place of submission by hearing the voice of God in your life you had an encounter with Christ so that when you rose from that place that place of coming to an end of yourself you were a completely different person yes you still had the same personality and look the same but spiritually speaking you were a different person all things had passed away and all things had become new jaycee riles said that to be born again is to enter into

a new existence this is what happened to Saul here on this road to have a new mind a new heart new views new principles new tastes new affections new likes new dislikes new fears new joys new sorrows new love to things once hated new hatred to things once loved new thoughts of God ourselves the world the life to come and salvation when we are brought low by the Lord Jesus and when we were then raised up in his mercy all things become new I think it was George quidfield correct me if I'm wrong who would frequently say in his sermons you must be born again he would say it over and over and over again you must be born again and someone once said to him why do you keep saying you must be born again to which he answered because you must be born again this is a new birth this is the grace that that changes even the most wicked of hearts this is the grace that changed the heart and the desires of Saul of Tarsh's taking him from that place where he desired to to persecute and despise the Lord's people to that place where he submitted before the

Lord and you know that grace is the same grace that has changed my heart and many other hearts here in this place tonight and can change your heart also if only you will desire it meanwhile the Lord continues to demonstrate his power by you remember as we read speaking to a disciple named Ananias and the Lord told Ananias to rise and go to the street called straight and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsh's named Saul for behold he's praying further evidence that the effect of the spirit has taken place in his life he's praying and he's seen in a vision and man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight God gives specific instructions to Ananias the spirit is bearing witness with him as to Saul's situation Ananias is given a spirit of discernment he's told to go and meet Saul where he's at he doesn't know of Saul in that way he's heard of

[27 : 50] Saul but yet the spirit of God has brought Saul before his mind now although we don't live in the Apostolic Age and I'm not for one minute suggesting that we do I don't think it's right for us to say that we can no longer have a spirit of discernment for others I sometimes fear that we we put the supernatural realm so far away from us that we don't I think I've touched on this before that we don't tap into it in the way that we could in a way that would truly bless both ours and ourselves and others and I'm sure there's Christians in here who've had perhaps well they've been praying or even washing the dishes or driving along they've had one of the maybe not one of the Lord's people maybe just somebody they know flash before their mind wonder if that's happened to you someone's really flashed strongly before your mind out of nowhere and you think well what was that all about where did that come from maybe you start feeling well maybe I should go and visit that person this has happened to me to my shame so often I say I'll go but maybe another day until then it's too late you find out maybe they've passed away or you're unable to visit them for some reason these things happen these people are put on a radar and we're to where to be obedient the older Christians often said to me be oil gonna smooing that's ungodly it means to be obedient to the thought so when the Lord puts a thought for good in our mind about someone else we're to act upon it there was a lady in this called Jesse Ann

MacFarther I don't know if anybody here's heard of her before she lived at Dell Farham and she was a very spiritual lady she was living within living memory although not my living memory but she was living I think she died in the 1970s but as she grew older on the farm money began to get scarce and the farm was getting run down and she really began to worry she was such a kind woman in so many ways throughout her life I heard the story once that she went to Stornoway to to buy a new coat she had the money in her pocket she needed a new coat but she met someone on the street who was dire need who didn't have money for food let alone let alone a quote so she gave that person all her money and went home with her old quote that's just an aside but it shows the kind of lady she was now this night herself and her sister they were earnestly praying to the Lord that he would help them and as they were praying there was a free Presbyterian man in Skugershta the other end of Ness who was praying at the same time now this man didn't know Jesse Ann he knew who she was but he didn't know her that well and as he was praying she came so strongly before his mind he was a spiritual man and he didn't disregard that thought as I so often have myself and so in the morning he got the first bus up to Dell so that when she came down she lived in the big farmhouse it had an upstairs in it when she came down here he was standing in her kitchen and he said to her

I am the man he would have said it in Gaelic I am the man who never got a wink of sleep throughout the night because of you he had been obedient to the thought and he he did all that he could to come and to comfort Jesse Ann and no doubt to help him to help her sorry in any way that he could and I'm sure you have countless similar stories here that you could share yourselves but I think if we're being honest if we if we acted in such a way today people would think that we were out of our minds perhaps this is a challenge then to us tonight that we are we're not being as discerning and recognizing the promptings of the Holy Spirit in the way that we should when God speaks here to Ananias he at first resists he questions understandably the validity of of God's request of him to go and and meet with Saul he knew about Saul he would have heard of Saul and the fact that he was persecuting others and he he would have found it unbelievable that he was to find this man praying and that he was to lay his hands on him so that he would regain his sight again you can imagine the perplexity the confusion in the mind of Ananias but he obeyed against all the odds against how ridiculous this might have sounded he obeyed God's voice because he knew that God knew better he went and he entered the house that was on the street called Strait now this is a very long street in Damascus it's one of the oldest occupied streets it's still occupied today it went from the the east gate to the west he went there he entered the house and upon seeing Saul he laid his hands on him so that immediately we read something like scales were removed from his eyes now some commentators say that this we were not sure that this symbolizes the spiritual blindness when he's now seeing the Lord in all his glory but we can't be sure about that then we we come friends to and very briefly our final point proclamation after Ananias enters the house and has this encounter with Saul we read that shortly after

Saul immediately proclaims Jesus in the synagogue saying he is the son of God now be to mind this is the same man who had been making his way to persecute the Lord's people in Damascus and here instead of persecuting he's proclaiming Christ in the synagogues himself what amazing powerful grace Calvin when referring to Saul here says that God's grace is seen not only in such a cruel wolf being turned into a sheep but also in his assuming the character of a shepherd this was a wolf who had not only become a sheep but a shepherd what a beautiful picture of God's God's saving grace and Saul's proclamation of Jesus Christ was such a witness in itself that those around him were astounded they were astounded to see this change in his life instead of persecuting Christ he was now promoting Christ and how we too should follow his example you know when we are saved by the Lord it is not a ticket to put our feet up and just to forget about everyone else we're not to hide our light under a bushel and I say that to myself as much as I do to you friends let us pray that we would get the boldness to nail our colors to the mass for all to see whether it be in our workplace or in a committee that we're on or or in our families whatever we find ourselves in school that we would nail our colors to the mass for everyone to see that we are Christ's and doing so we read as Saul did that we're truly blessed as his people when we stand up for his name when we proclaim his name we read in verse 22 that by proving that Jesus was Christ now how did he prove that Jesus was Christ he did so through his life we cannot prove that Jesus is Christ we cannot talk people into the kingdom by rationalizing with them that is impossible it's the work of the Spirit he proved that Jesus was Christ by proclaiming this through what Christ had done to him and what did he get in return we read that

Saul increased all the more in strength don't you want to increase all the more in strength day by day as one of the lords this of course wasn't a physical strength that Saul would have sought in the past as he as he would have fought so many battles this was a spiritual strength that now enabled him to go on and to fight that good fight of faith to be used oh so mightily as the apostle Paul friends do you not desire that strength for yourself well it's here it's on offer to you day by day through Christ you may be waiting for a flashing light a road to Damascus conversion just like Saul but you know in a sense every single conversion is a road to Damascus conversion every single new birth is evidence of the the power of the word of God in the lives of his persecutors I wonder do you know as you leave here tonight do you know that power of God unto salvation or are you still a persecutor of Christ like Saul you're doing all the right things and please carry on doing that I'm not putting down on you for that but like Saul you're doing all the right things but yet Christ is not sitting upon the throne of your heart persecution power proclamation where do you stand tonight on this road to Damascus on this road to eternity are you heading for heaven or are you heading for hell amen we pray the Lord would bless these few thoughts to us and to his name be all the praise