

## *What's Your Verdict?*

Have you ever heard of Paul? I am talking about Paul the apostle, the man – Saul of Tarsus – who was converted on the Damascus Road. You've got him now? If not, you can read about him in the New Testament, Acts 9.

Well, anyway, I want to take up his life story some years later than Acts 9; Acts 28, in fact. Paul is now a prisoner of the Roman Empire, under house-arrest. He has just arrived in Rome after being transported in a series of hazardous sea voyages crossing the Mediterranean, including a shipwreck close to Malta. A proper Robinson Crusoe story! But, exciting though that was, it's not what I want to talk to you about at this time.

As I say, Paul had been converted, years ago. Ever since that time, he had been a preacher of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. That was what got him into trouble with the Jews, then the Romans – and that's why he was in Rome, awaiting trial. But as I say, Paul's passion was preaching the gospel, and the first thing he did as soon as he was settled in Rome was to call for the local Jewish leaders: he wanted to preach the gospel to them. They came. They arranged a further meeting, and came in even larger numbers. Paul spent all day with them, preaching the gospel to them, 'trying to convince them about Jesus', arguing his case from the Old Testament – the law and the prophets. You can find all this recorded by Luke in Acts 28:17-31.

So far, so good. But now for the point I'm driving at. Let me quote the relevant verse (Acts 28:24): 'Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe'. I want to make four brief – but important – points. Please consider what I say. It could change your life. It could change your eternity!

***1. Paul wanted to see these Jewish leaders converted.***

He made no bones about it. They were left in no doubt. When the Bible says that Paul tried to convince them (Acts 28:23), that's what it means. But let me stress a vital point: he wasn't interested in convincing them intellectually. He wanted them to come to trust Christ. Of course, they needed to be told the facts of the gospel, but Paul was trying to persuade them in their hearts.

Bear in mind that they were Jews, Jewish leaders. They should have known that the law and the prophets were all telling them that God would send his Son to be born among the Jews in order to be the Messiah, and to die to redeem his people. But like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, they were foolish and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets had told them – especially about the death and resurrection of the Christ. That is what Jesus told those two disciples, and, going through the Old Testament, he showed them what he meant (Luke 24:25-27). And that's just what Paul was doing in his house at Rome when he was preaching to the Jewish leaders. Sadly, however, the Jews had a veil over their hearts, and when they read the Old Testament by and large they failed to see what it was about. But, when a Jew cries out to God, 'turns to the Lord', 'the veil is taken away' (2 Cor. 3:14-16).

And that's precisely the thing Paul was aiming for. He wanted to convince them to turn to the Lord and be saved. As he always did, Paul preached because he wanted his hearers to be converted. The same goes for me with what you are reading here. I am writing this so that as many as possible might read it and be converted to the Lord Jesus.

***2. Paul's hearers fell into one of two camps.***

Some were convinced; some were not. It is always the case. Some are convinced. Some are not.

'Just a minute', do I hear you say? 'That's not right, is it? What happened when Paul preached to the men on Mars Hill in Athens? And what happened when he

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preached to Felix? Didn't some at Mars Hill say they wanted to hear another time? Didn't Felix do the same (Acts 17:32; 24:25)?'

Yes, that's true. But there's something we should bear in mind about all that. Jesus made it very clear: people are either for or against me, he said; there is no middle way (Matt. 12:30). So when people say something like: 'I can't decide... but I'd like to hear again', the fact is, they are in effect saying 'No!' to Christ. That's the reality. 'Yes' is 'Yes'; everything else is 'No'. Besides which, there is no guarantee that you will ever get another opportunity. You might. But you might not.

So there it is. When people hear the gospel, they fall into one of two camps: they either turn and receive Christ and his offer of the gospel, or they do not.

Reader, which camp are you in? You are hearing the gospel now. Will you turn and receive Christ, or will you put him off?

### ***3. It gets worse.***

What do you mean? Let me quote the verse again: 'Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe'. Can you spot the imbalance? Some were convinced; others were not convinced. Ah! But *that* is what it does *not* say! Some were convinced; the rest refused. That is what it says! Some believed; others would not believe. It was a question of the will, of the heart. Some were converted; others set themselves against it – they would not have it. You see the point: they *would not* believe!

I am reminded of the time when the Jewish bigwigs were questioning Jesus, demanding that he gave them his authority for the things he was doing. Jesus replied: he would answer their question if they would answer his. And what was his question? Just this: John the Baptist – his baptism – was it from heaven or men? The Jews chewed it over, privately. 'We can't say heaven', they said. 'If we do

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he'll want to know why we didn't believe John'. 'But we can't say men. If we do, the people will go berserk and do all sorts – they think John was a prophet'. Coming back to Jesus, this is what they said: 'We don't know'. Now that was a downright lie. They did know! *But they didn't want to say*. Jesus pounced: 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things' (Matt. 21:23-27). Did you spot it? 'We don't know', they said. 'Oh no', retorted Christ, 'it's not a question of knowledge – you do know. It's all a question of will. You *will not* tell me, so I will not tell you'.

*This is the point*. Will not! Would not! Refusal of Christ is a question of will. To say 'No' to Christ, therefore, is not something to be excused or pitied. In a sense, we should not feel sorry for those who hear the gospel and do not believe. We do, of course. But the truth is, they refuse to have Christ: 'We don't want this man to be king' (Luke 19:14). Or, as it could be translated: 'We will not have this man to reign over us'. There it is: the will. You see, when people say something like: 'I wish I could believe', what are they really saying? If anybody says that to me, he is paying me a massive insult – he wishes he could believe me? He wishes he could trust me? Well then, think how it must sound to God!

So I ask again: Which camp are you in? Are you a believer? Or do you refuse to believe?

### ***4. But that's not the last word.***

Oh no! As Paul told the Jews that day, God had already predicted their response. 'They close their eyes'. They don't want to see. Their hearts are callous, hard. They will not turn; they will not receive Christ. That is what God had foretold through Isaiah the prophet (Acts 28:25-27). Christ came into the world knowing this – but still he came. Paul knew this – but still he preached.

It is ever thus. While some, by God's grace, do repent and believe, do turn from their sins and turn to Christ,

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relying upon him to wash them from their sins in his precious blood, many – the majority – refuse it.

And what does God do about it? Well, as Paul said, if you won't have Christ as your Saviour and Lord, God will take his gospel from you and take it to others – and they will receive Christ (Acts 28:28).

Now that is the very thing which happened to the Jews. The gospel was sent first to them (Acts 3:26; Rom. 1:16). By and large, they refused it. Consequently, God took it to the Gentiles. I am convinced this is happening today. I am convinced that the west, particularly the UK, has been favoured with the gospel for centuries. By and large, the west has refused Christ. Speaking of the UK, apathy reigns, does it not? Well, as I read events, God might well be taking his gospel from us in the west, and taking it to the east, taking it to Africa or wherever. In other words, we might come to experience what God promised through Amos: I 'will send a famine through the land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD. Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it' (Amos 8:11-12).

But let me put the global aspect of all this to one side. Let me come closer to home – to you, reader. The gospel has come to you, yet again in this tract. You have reacted to it. One way, or another, you have reacted. Oh yes, you have! You have received Christ, or you have not. You may have ignored what you read, of course, laughed at it, be just about to put it to one side, hated it, be about to tear it up... but unless you have received Christ you have rejected him. So I ask you the question I asked in my title: What's your verdict? Will you receive Christ or... what?

Remember, anything less than receiving Christ is refusing him. If you refuse him now, if you put him off now, I do not say you will never get another opportunity, but I cannot say that you will. More important: *neither can*

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*you!* In light of this, there is only way for me to bring this piece to a close. I will give two texts. They speak for themselves:

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks... How... will we [escape] if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? (Heb. 12:25).

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near (Isa. 55:6).