

**Acts 9: 1-22**  
**Proverbs 3: 5-6**

**Pray:** Open our hearts, Father God. Teach us, Lord Jesus. Fill us to overflowing, HS. That we may grow in Christ and draw many others to him in our lifetime.

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**Introduction**

When we read in the New Testament the Apostle Paul's many letters to the various churches, and we sense his passion, and love and joy for the believers, it is sometimes easy to forget how much he had *hated them* at first. His mission was to halt the spread of Christianity. The then-called Saul, approved of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and Saul began a violent campaign against all the believers.

In **Acts 22** Paul explains his background:

He was born in Tarsus, in the Roman province of Cilicia. He was born a Jew and was thoroughly trained in Jewish law and customs. His extensive learning and understanding of the scriptures made him a zealous man for God, he was passionate about honouring God's name and he despised the Christian believers for following Jesus of Nazareth.

Saul persecuted men and women. Many were imprisoned and some were cruelly put to their death because of Saul.

But in a dramatic turn of events he is *literally* brought to his knees before the Lord Jesus Christ and challenged to change direction.

I wonder if we have grown complacent about God's ability to turn lives around?

We rarely hear of dramatic conversions in our midst, although as a teenager I remember reading books like '*Run Baby Run*', where Nicky Cruz, the violent leader of a notorious Brooklyn street gang, is converted to Christianity and becomes a renowned preacher after encountering Jesus.

Have we grown a bit sceptical, and lowered our expectation of what God's Holy Spirit is capable of doing in the lives of people who don't yet believe? (*Or in our own lives*)

If I'm honest, perhaps sometimes I have. The majority of people I usually speak to have had a long, slow journey in their Christian faith.

But it seems, from what I am reading and hearing, that we can expect more from God. Only last week Stephanie sent me an article from the Guardian about UK Bible sales *soaring* and church attendance of young adults growing.

Bible sales have increased by 134% since 2019 - the highest since records began.

In 2025 the Bible Society published a report suggesting the number of people attending church in England and Wales rose by 50% since 2018.

The number of *young people* attending church rose from 4% in 2018 to 16% last year. There is also a noticeable increase in the number of men now attending church.

The article said that many of those buying Bibles in the Church House bookshop near Westminster Abbey:

***"have no Christian background whatsoever and no grounding from their parents or from their school"*** but they are seeing Christianity as a 'counter-cultural' force... an alternative path to their secular upbringing.

These are *not* people like the apostle Paul, whose childhood was steeped in knowledge of any scripture, or even like many of us here today, who were brought up attending Sunday School and had Christian assemblies at school... no, these are unchurched young men and women who are seeking to understand the world around them better - and they are discovering *truth* in the person of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

We know that in some cases the interest is coming from online influencers. But whatever the catalyst, is it pointing people to scripture.

Not that many years ago, it seemed that celebrities were idolised but perhaps their appeal has not stood the test of time. It is not the famous being sought right now, but a new faith path - one that points to Jesus.

This is an opportunity we as a church cannot afford to miss!

There is something happening around us that we may not understand, but it is evidence of God on the move right now. Some are calling it the '*Quiet Revival*'. Some people with no church background are describing having had dreams about encountering Jesus. Many are reading the Bible online and going on to purchase their own Bible.

And we are called to get on board with what God is doing and to meet people where they are at, whether we understand it or not.

We *need* to have a great expectation of what God is doing and *will do* in the future; this is a movement that we haven't seen in decades and we need to TRUST in what we are seeing.

It's like the lesson in Matthew 24:32 that Jesus teaches about the fig tree - look at nature and you can tell what is coming:

***'When its branches bud and its leaves begin to sprout, you know that summer is near.'***

## St Paul's Day Sermon 2026

In the same way, when we have young men in their teens and older, contacting us via the church office and asking to be baptised because they have been reading the Bible, we can deduce that God *is* moving **in this** parish.

We started Youth Alpha 2 weeks ago. It is such a great place to be. To hear teenagers and young adults sharing about their budding faith without embarrassment or shame. It is not like me when I was younger.

I went to a rough junior school. I didn't realise it at the time but looking back the regular invitation of 'wanna fight after school?' and the language I'd never heard at home, and the material and relational poverty were very telling.

I invited a school friend to my home for a sleepover. When it came to bedtime, as we did every night, my Dad knelt by the bed to pray. Sharon didn't say a word to me and I thought nothing of it.

The next school day I came out at break time and my entire class were kneeling on the playground concourse and when I came out they all bowed up and down and said:

*"Oh God, we pray to you, Oh God, we love you, Jesus, God, Amen"*

I can laugh now, but I remember the feeling of bewilderment at my 'friend' and of my shame in Christianity.

For years I was never comfortable speaking the name of Jesus outside of the church environment, for fear of what people would think of me.

Not so with the young people we speak with at Alpha. They say they talk openly with their friends. They discuss faith and God and what they are reading in the Bible. Their faith is unspoilt by guilt or shame.

It is wonderful.

It is a moment in our lifetimes that I haven't seen before.

It is exciting and encouraging - and we need to be here and be ready to nurture and grow their faith.

The first thing God did when Saul (renamed Paul by now) had spent three days blind and not eating or drinking, was to unite him with a faithful believer in Jesus Christ, Ananias. Understandably, Ananias is a little reticent, having heard about Paul's persecution agenda. Initially he objects to God's call to visit Paul, but he is reassured that this is indeed from God *and is all part of a much greater plan*.

In a short time, Paul's vision is restored, he is baptised and (note) he is drawn in to the fellowship of believers in Damascus. And then his dynamic ministry for Christ begins.

This is not a long drawn out gradual Christian journey.

This is a dramatic, completely unexpected conversion.

It happened.

And sudden conversions are happening now.

Revival is what we pray for, but maybe never really expected to see. We need to have expectant and trusting hearts for what God is doing and get on board with his agenda. (**See verse of the year**) We trust not in our own (limited) understanding of how God *usually* works, but we trust that what we are seeing currently is real and powerful.

## Part two

Trust is going to be essential in this place.

It takes a huge dose of trust in God to move forward when we are uncertain.

We need to recognise that what we have here, at St Paul's is not enough for what God is doing.

- *Our building is not meeting the needs we and other groups have - and yet the thought of any big development project seems ludicrous when we cannot even meet our monthly general expenditure.*
- *We are sure that God wants to see more children and young people in this place - and yet, despite a faithful and dedicated Team of Sunday Squad volunteers, we still have really small numbers of children at present*
- *We have tried to build a joint Youth Group, but numbers and enthusiasm dwindled as the year went on*

What is the path ahead when it looks unclear, or even impossible to navigate?

We don't know, but we see, like the lesson of the fig tree, signs that God is moving and evidence that he has bigger plans for St Paul's than we can imagine.

As we look at the verse of the year, which each of you have been given, I would like to ask that we all make this a *daily prayer*, to trust God wholeheartedly, for the life of this church and for our individual lives.

Our own understanding is too limited.

When we lean on our own understanding we shrink God down to our size.

This made me laugh a few months ago.

Martin mentioned how, if a person prays only for what they can imagine with their own mind, that is all that will happen.

When I arrived here I had come from a church where Morning Prayer was just me and my incumbent. I said that I would hold open Morning Prayer on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays and I prayed that more people would come than in my previous church.

I bought 15 Common Worship books. Not counting the special events, guess what the maximum numbers we have ever had at Morning prayer is... yes, 15!

I needed to pray bigger.

Did anyone watch Monty Don's Rhineland gardens a few nights ago? At one point Monty visited the Industrial bar Landshaftpark in Duisburg. It is a huge redundant industrial landscape which has been converted to retain its infrastructure, whilst all around are planted wonderful horticultural creations. The locals initial reaction was '**less than enthusiastic**' but it now boasts 1 million visitors a year.

Monty says: *the young treat it as an enormous adventure playground, and for an older generation it remains part of Germany's industrial heritage.*

It is possible to blend the old with the new and have something that brings joy to everyone.

Monty is astounded at the sheer enormity of the gardens around him He says: "*Occasionally when you come across something on a truly magnificent scale, it enlarges your life, you are made bigger as a result.*"

Our own understanding is shallow and small. We cannot see the whole road ahead. But when we lean on God, when we trust him with our whole heart, who knows what great places he will lead us to?

One final point I want to make, as you look at the verse from Proverbs:

There is the command to trust God with ALL your heart...

This is an invitation not to hold back, but to give it all over.

I have used this analogy before and I will again, especially as it is topical for us right now because it's about central heating...

In America I understand it is very common for many big houses to have a furnace or boiler in the basement. The heat is a centralised source, which then feeds every part of the house. But the whole home does not always get heated up, because in each room there are vents which you can shut so that certain room remain unheated.

Our hearts are a bit like this.

We choose sometimes to keep the vent closed on one or two areas of our life - and then we wonder why that place is cold and uncomfortable to spend time in.

The Spirit of God is not given to us in meagre amounts, but given in generous measure, but if the vent to the Spirit is closed God cannot gain access.

Maybe it is time to let go of some of our own plans and trust God with our whole heart. Maybe then, when we cease to lean on our own limited understanding, he can guide our direction - and make the path ahead clear - and straight.