

## Living His Story 7

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### Welcome

The final week – as we are now in Holy Week as it is known.

It's the final chapter of the book – Living His Story and this week is entitled:

'Stories of Finding Jesus – Understanding the different ways people come to faith.'

### Prayer

So this week it is all about how people actually come to faith. And to make a broad generalisation I am going to suggest that there are two contrasting routes to faith – as illustrated by this map



As you can see there are two places highlighted: Damascus in the north and Emmaus in the south west. And some of you will already have identified why I have highlighted these two towns. Luke – the Gospel writer and author of Acts gives us two conversion stories of contrasting nature

### The Road to Emmaus

### The Road to Damascus

At the end of his Gospel in Luke 24, he gives us the account of Jesus meeting two people while walking on the road to Emmaus. Jesus doesn't disclose who he is and even seems to play dumb with the line:

**18 Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' 19**

**He asked them, 'What things?'**

They replied that it's the things about Jesus of Nazareth and they share their now thwarted hope that he might have been the one to redeem Israel.

**27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.**

This is classically understood as Jesus methodically going through the whole story of God's saving work in the world and ends with him breaking bread and the opening of their eyes to who he was and the truth about faith.

By way of contrast, we also have recorded by Luke in Acts 9 the story of Saul's persecution of the fledgling church which takes him on a journey to Damascus. En route Saul is confronted by a literally blinding light. In vs 4 we read:

**4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 5 He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.'**

**17 So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul[b] and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,**

This, classically, is understood as an example of a sudden conversion; a complete turnaround in a very short period precipitated by a crisis and a revelation.

So these two stories are used as examples of different kinds of conversion – process and crisis event.

### **Evangelical bias towards Damascus**

I guess that my experience contains a bit of both. The culture of the day (70's) was weighted towards Damascus Road:

- Preaching the Gospel
- Gospel Services (evenings)
- Evangelistic campaigns
- The 'altar-call'

I too responded to an altar call, aged 13, albeit that I had been to church my whole life and have the end of year Scripture Union exam certificates to prove it!

In the book Hannah talks of her own conversion which has similarities to mine. I especially like the way she describes it:

*'I attended a gathering at Villa Park in 1984, with Sir Cliff Richard performing and Billy Graham preaching. I recall being stirred by his preaching of the Gospel and going forward onto Villa's pitch to give my life to Christ, one of many times in my youth that I did this just to make sure! At the same time I also, coincidentally, gave my life to following Aston Villa, which has proved to be a far less reliable decision.'*

I guess many of us have been involved with big campaigns, or at least with inviting friends or family along to Gospel events so that they might hear the story of Jesus.

I recall taking a work colleague in London to lunchtime services at St Helen's Bishopsgate to hear prebendary Dick Lucas – Kay came to faith.

I took a then girlfriend to hear Billy Graham in 1984, along with her flatmate. They didn't come to faith and the relationship came to an end.

I took another work colleague to hear Luis Palau at QPR football ground. I knew Laura was quite posh, but it was chatting to her before the event that she explained that although her parents lived in India, her dad was over in the UK at the moment as he had to visit the queen. I then discovered that he was the High Commissioner to India. (When I told this story to my then minister, never one to miss a trick, he mentioned this the following Sunday in his sermon stating that, 'While Laura's father was meeting the Queen, Luara was being introduced to the King!' (Now I'm never quite that bad!))

The Damascus Road conversion, the process, does however seem to be much more in vogue today. Perhaps with the advent of the Alpha Course (clues in the title – it's a course) conversion is understood to be much more of a process and church life and activity seems more planned around this approach.

Albeit that 'The Message Trust' are partnering with lots of churches to bring Festival Manchester 2022.

### **Q1. Briefly share how you came to faith and whether you think it was more Emmaus Road or Damascus Road.**

It is more likely, I think, that people within a church such as ABC, would side with the process, Emmaus Road journey to faith, against the more direct Damascus Road approach. That is perhaps because:

- Research says that more people come to faith through a process.
- It allows for questions, exploration, reflection – all things which are valued in our culture.
- We live in a post-Christian culture, so we cannot presume anymore even on the basics of faith.
- Perhaps it also 'weeds out' those who don't really want to come to faith – those who like in the parable of the sower shoot up only to be scorched by the sun or found to be in shallow soil.

But I wouldn't be so slow to dismiss the Damascus Road approach.

- I think it keeps the profile of evangelism high and alive in the church.
- I think it is effective.
- I said some weeks ago what was my favourite part of ministry at ABC – funerals – because people are in a place where they are reflecting on their lives and to share faith in that moment is to take a window of opportunity. I guess Weddings are also such a moment.

Whether special service, or Alpha Course – it takes us to invite people along.

Given what we have looked at this far:

### **Q2. Can you identify some steps which people often pass through on their journey to faith in Jesus?**

## Trust

I remember Glen Marshall speaking at ABC some time ago. He had a dig at what he described as ‘friendship evangelism’, saying that he felt it was deceiving that people form friendships, not for friendship sake, but for the purpose of telling people about Jesus.

I guess I got what he was saying, albeit that he was overstating it. Yes, we shouldn’t deceive people forming a relationship just to share faith – there must be genuine relationship. But equally, it is from established relationships that the greatest possibility of sharing faith exists, (unless you are like J. John who seems to convert every taxi-driver who ever gives him a ride!)

Trust of the church, Christians, Christianity may be at an all-time low. The way the church is portrayed in the media does little to help.

- **Vicar of Dibley – nice but ineffective.**
- **Rev. – challenged and conflicted**
- **Fleabag – ‘hot-priest’**
- **Broken – Sean Bean – actual reality.**

Trust stems from what a person sees in you. Integrity, or to use an old word, sincerity. Origins of ‘sincere’ Latin sine-cera, without wax. Roman marbles statues, where chips/mistakes would be filled in with a mixture of marble dust and wax – but when the sun came out... So something that was real and true was sincere, sine-cera, without wax.

## Interest

The crucial question, how on earth do we spark interest in Christian faith? One of the problems is that we think we need to say everything, explain the whole thing in one go – which seems really daunting. So thinking we have to say everything means that we end up saying nothing.

Back to that conversation I had with neighbour Peter. We were talking about the pandemic and I think the best thing I shared evangelistically was to suggest that the pandemic had caused people to re-evaluate their goals, what life was about, what people worked and saved and planned for – implying that this wasn’t what it wasn’t all it was cracked up to be.

So what does that look like?

Monday morning someone at work, or a neighbour asks you the simple question, ‘So how was your weekend?’

- To talk about church or not talk about church? – is the usual challenge.
  - Play it safe, shopping, gardening, TV, cooking, walk – or mention church.
  - And if you do mention church, ‘I went to church’ likely to get a blank – pregnant pause. The tumbleweed rolls across the conversation.

- But how about this? What about saying, 'I am still trying to process something I heard at church.' What a brilliant, open-ended, enticing, answer to that question.

### Q3. What ideas do you have which engender trust and spark interest? Any great one-liners to help?

#### Open-mind

After Trust and Interest, Hannah identifies a third stage she sees in the process of conversion, this is the 'open-mind', something which Hannah suggests is likely to be the longest stage.

- So questions have been asked and answered (at least in part).
- Debate has been had.
- Some of the obstacles to faith have been removed, but...

This is the point when Christianity moves from the theoretical to the practical – or if you want it, the head to the heart.

That takes a massive shift of the imagination. To consider the world and life are not aligned/defined in the way you had thought they are, (were taught they are) and entertain the possibility that there is actually another story at play – that is an enormous shift.

It will take patience, repeated engagement (so don't be put off by a lack of response) and even at times backward steps.

At this point I give to you **The Engel Scale!**



Remember O level Maths! Axis with minus to plus.

This is the basis to the Engel scale. In the graphic they have filled in each stage, I'm not sure things are quite that simple, but what it does show are the little steps many people take towards faith.

The crucial thing is how those little steps take place, something we will come back to in a moment after we have talked about stage four – or perhaps something which is happening alongside gaining an open mind – that is asking (and answering) questions.

## Questions

This is where Alpha, or Christianity Explored come into their own.

If we have been Christians 'all our lives' or at least for a long time, it can be hard to grasp just how enormous the shift is from what we thought we knew, to what might be true.

It will prompt questions and then many more subsidiary questions.

So we are talking about people becoming open-minded and asking questions. My question to you is:

**Q4. What ways could you help someone along the 'Engel Scale' and 'What questions do you think people are asking today?'**

## To end

To follow Jesus is to give up everything in order to gain the thing of greatest value.

Some years ago I heard a story of a family who escaped the grip of communism. They were Czechoslovakian and were facing increasing persecution for their non-compliance with the communist authorities. To pass from Czechoslovakia to Austria was nigh impossible but it might be possible to cross to Hungary first and then pass into Austria. But crossing the border from Czechoslovakia to Hungary without papers – which given their record, they would never receive – was still incredibly difficult. But they hatched a plan.

They sold everything they had. All their possessions, all their belongings even their home and they bought the biggest and best car they possibly could; then they drove to the border.

They were stopped at the border, in their enormous car. But what they had going for them was that the only people in Czechoslovakia to have enormous cars were Communist Party Officials. They delivered their carefully concocted story and were waved through – eventually finding sanctuary in Austria.

Matthew 13:

**45 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.'**

The faith we have is a pearl of great value.

It is very expensive and only relinquishing everything we have will secure its purchase.

So I want to end by reminding you of this.

We have a priceless beautiful faith.

It's ours through grace and it's our immense privilege to share it with others.

Let's pray that we do just that.