

The Rock: 07-25-2021**Community series****First reading: None****Title:** Paul's conversion**Scripture:** Acts 9: 26-31**Theme:**

God calls people and builds His church in unexpected and sometimes unsettling ways

Introduction:

I got to thinking about how I came to Christ as a late teen. What life looked like then, how I was living, what I was doing here in northern Vermont.

I can't imagine my life without Christ at this point, even though I remember it before Christ. It sometimes strikes me how strange a story the Bible gives us.

Trying to remind myself from the outside looking in perspective, how unbelievable it can seem. Then I thought: "No one comes to belief in Santa Claus at 20, 30, 40 years of age. Who would?"

Yet, so many have their hearts converted and lives changed when they have an

encounter with, not a myth or fable, but an encounter with the risen Christ.

Saul of Tarsus, later to become widely known by his Roman name, Paul, is without a doubt the most unlikely convert in the history of the Church.

At no level would anyone have expected this, least of all him. We learned a lot about Paul in our time in *Philippians*, and those things really reinforce this notion.

He had everything: power, influence, position. There was no reason to think he would be challenged in his life by anyone. Perhaps even becoming one of the greatest teachers and theologians the world had even seen.

But wait, he actually did. Just not in the way he thought it would happen.

The Story:

C.S. Lewis, in his book; *Surprised by Joy*, shares his conversion story, and I can't help but see the similarities between he and Saul of Tarsus.

Lewis, an atheist, fought for years against the story of the gospel and who God was. That was until he couldn't anymore. As with Saul, he wasn't looking

for God. God, he discovered, was looking for him.

Saul, thinking he was actually doing God a great service found himself doing what the atheist Lewis was doing some 20 centuries later -fighting against God and the calling (true calling) upon his life.

Lewis, says this about himself:

"You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, whenever my mind lifted for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England"

-Surprised by Joy: C.S. Lewis

A question: How does a story start with:

-Acts 9:1-2 ESV

"But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem."

Somehow end at a point where in verse 20:

-Acts 9:20 ESV

"And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

The hunter becoming the hunted-
proclaiming the very message he set out
to destroy. It's those two words that
always change the game:

But God.

I believe that the conversion of Saul of Tarsus is the single greatest argument against any argument which declares; God isn't real. That He is a fantasy, a fairy tale for those afraid of the dark as Richard Dawkins would say.

Or that there has to be another way in which humanity can fix its brokenness. But we are the ones who have broken things. So how then, without some sort of outside help, can we fix it?

The answer is we can't, and that is the frightening truth when you declare that God is not real, that He doesn't exist. That leaves humanity without hope.

Ahh, but the Bible is a book filled with hope because of Jesus. So, when we look at this Saul -let's just go with Paul for

the sake of ease- we see that there was never in history a more unlikely candidate for conversion.

He wasn't a poor, downtrodden, abused outcast in need of some hope and help, looking for a reason to live another day.

There wasn't any kind of fatalistic outlook on life, as though everything was somehow stacked against him. In fact, he is probably the best argument against the "need for salvation" as any you could find.

He was on the fast track to greatness, the best of the best at all he put his hands to, and he knew it. Those around him knew it, but he was angry. Breathing threats (verse 1), never satisfied with anything but perfection and absolute obedience to every single letter and command of the Law.

It's a pattern we see in self-sufficient folks, isn't it? Pride and self-focus. That self-made man who knows they've done it all in their own strength.

Yet, still so unhappy, unable to be satisfied even with themselves. Struggling to find contentment even in their own accomplishments. Why?

Because he's the prodigal son who never left home, the gatekeeper of the law,

whose mind and actions were / are always fully obedient, but whose heart was distant from the father, and hard.

I don't know, in all honesty as I work this out, if any of us actually look to be that way. I don't think so, but it does happen, doesn't it?

When it does, we self-justify and in our own insecurities and "fear of failure, not able to live up", we begin to rest in our own works and our own accomplishments.

That's Paul, and in the middle of thinking he is doing God's will and work, the prodigal who never left home, gets a divine wake up call.

-Acts 9:3-6 ESV

"Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

C.S. Lewis again:

I did not see then what is now the most shining and obvious thing: the divine

humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The prodigal son at least walked home on his own feet.

But who can duly adore that love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape?

The words 'compelle intrare', compel them to come in, have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them; but properly understood, they plumb the depths of divine mercy.

the hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation."

-Surprised by joy: C.S. Lewis

You ever wonder how you came to Christ? How about you here who haven't yet? You wonder why you are even here this morning? The conversion of Paul helps us understand it all.

It is because of God's divine love and His call upon you and me. He came looking for us, and He is still looking for us.

We hear that gentle whisper in our hearts, and choose to listen, or ignore it. It doesn't matter how far away any of you are, or even how far you've wandered. He finds you, and speaks to you. Why?

Because He loves you and wants the best for you, He wants a relationship with you. Yes, even if you think you have messed up beyond all hope and don't think it can be fixed.

Paul's story shows us that thought is false. His story is the hope that even the worst of the worst can cling to -that God so loves this world that he gave us Jesus, and He is looking for us.

The frightening challenge here is what Jesus says to him: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

Well, no I'm not, I'm trying to stop these people who believe this weird story that you are alive. UM...that's a goofy statement, isn't it? Yes, it is. Because Paul is being talked to by a very much alive Jesus.

That begs the question, for me anyway in our time with all of the challenges regarding the truth of the resurrection-

Why would this guy, who is on the fast track to success, and holding all the power, all of a sudden start to preach about Jesus as the risen King?

The very thing he has been throwing people into prison for and killing them. It makes no sense!

Is he crazy? Delusional? Is this the makings of a great story where the villain becomes the hero, because it gives us good feels and hope that we can somehow fix ourselves?

I don't think it's any of those things. It is just what Luke tells us: Paul is being sought by the very one he is trying to destroy.

But not to be crushed and punished himself, rather to become the most reluctant and unlikely convert in all of Israel.

This is what Paul writes so clearly in 1 Corinthians:

-1 Corinthians 1:18-25 ESV

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through

wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

This was Paul before his conversion, in his own wisdom, before he was knocked down and confronted by Jesus.

He was picked back up and sent out to tell the world that Jesus is the risen king. Again, the hunter became the hunted.

He shows up in Damascus, where people are expecting his reign of terror to continue and instead, he hits the local synagogue and in essence says: "Listen boys, I was way off about this Jesus."

-Acts 9:20-21 ESV

"And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here

for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?"

They look at him in total confusion, because this is not why he came. This is us sometimes, isn't it? We pray that God will save people, bring revival and fill His Kingdom.

Then we think: Wow, him! Really Lord? That one, goodnight, don't you know their background? Yeah, I do. I love them anyway. Just like I love you.

When we look at it and think it through, the Kingdom of God is full of the biggest hodge-podge group of misfits, fools, geniuses, goofballs, calm people, and temper-filled people you will find.

Sinners saved by grace - Debtors to mercy alone. Saints whom God has adopted as sons and daughters. That's us.

If any of us here today was bound to our past, to all of our mistakes, we would be without hope, without joy in this world. But we aren't!

In God's goodness, He has us growing in grace and always has that "one" who is just crazy enough to believe this stuff is all real, that God can take the worst of the worst and use them.

In this case, that crazy one went by the name of Barnabas, our friend from Philippians. Look at verses 26-27:

-Acts 9:26-27 ESV

"And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus."

The disciples thought this was some sort of trick and couldn't believe that this guy was for real. That he had "become one of them."

An aside - I want to encourage us all to remember God's goodness and grace toward us. Before we came to Christ and even to today, we are all just working out our salvation. We aren't bound, as I've said, to our past. Don't allow someone else hold you there.

Sinners saved by grace-debtors to mercy alone. I think that Barnabas really understood this, and as an encourager he had this gift to see beyond the surface and the past, and into the heart.

He is doing it here with Paul, and he would do it again with Mark. Sadly, in that moment, Paul it seems, forgot about the chance that Barnabas took on him when no one else would:

-Acts 15:36-41 ESV

"And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches."

Listen -We all make mistakes, speak too harshly sometimes, act too rashly- **BUT GOD**. This is why I am convinced that we are gifted with the ability to choose, and to respond to God. Yet, at the same time, it is He who initiates that conversation. None of us goes looking for Him. That's ok.

He has His eye on us, His heart set on us and makes us tender to hear His call. Why? Because He loves us more than we even love ourselves.

Just like Paul, we all have a story. Most of us coming from the most unlikely of places into a relationship with Christ - and I think, at least I know for myself, have at least one person in that story who had the courage to wrap their arms around this most unlikely and reluctant of converts and joined me in my journey.

I close with a simple quote from Chuck Swindoll as those who are going to help with prayer come forward:

"There is no one more persistent than God when He decides to save someone."

-Living insights: Pg. 162

If you don't know Him today, come to Him, He is calling. Don't harden your heart.