

This morning we are continuing through the book of Acts, the story of the early church. It has been quite an exciting ride for the early disciples so far. Remember that they had been following Jesus, convinced that he was the Messiah, the one who would overthrow their Roman oppressors and restore Israel to its former glory. But Jesus was brutally crucified, nailed to a cross, crushing his followers. But Jesus rose from the dead, proclaiming to them that His mission was not to overthrow Rome but to destroy the power of a bigger enemy, the devil, to overthrow death, to make a way by His death for people around the world, whose sins had separated them from God, to be brought back into relationship with God, both now and beyond the grave.

After his resurrection, Jesus spends time over a period of 40 days with his disciples. He then ascends to heaven, and sends His Holy Spirit to be the presence and power of God inside each believer. He sends the disciples out as witnesses to His life, death, and resurrection, calling people to turn from their sin and self-centeredness to faith in Jesus. Thousands of people are coming to faith in Jesus, and a multi-ethnic community has formed in Jerusalem that is growing like crazy, devoted to following Jesus and caring for everyone's needs. But they also face a great deal of persecution. In chapter 7, we read about a Jewish religious leader named Saul who is dedicated to destroying this church, and by the end of chapter 8, a great persecution has broken out and most of the disciples are scattered among the neighboring countries. But God has plans for this man named Saul, and that is the focus of this morning's reading in chapter 9.

*Acts 9:1-31 - Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" <sup>5</sup> "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. <sup>6</sup> "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." <sup>7</sup> The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. <sup>10</sup> In Damascus there was a **disciple named Ananias**. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. <sup>11</sup> The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. <sup>12</sup> In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his*

hands on him to restore his sight." <sup>13</sup> "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who **call on your name.**" <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. <sup>16</sup> I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." <sup>17</sup> Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord-- Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here-- has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with **the Holy Spirit.**" <sup>18</sup> Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup> and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. <sup>20</sup> At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. <sup>21</sup> All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners **to the chief priests?**" <sup>22</sup> Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. <sup>23</sup> After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, <sup>24</sup> but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. <sup>25</sup> But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. <sup>26</sup> When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he **really was a disciple.** <sup>27</sup> But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. <sup>28</sup> So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. <sup>29</sup> He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. <sup>30</sup> When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him **off to Tarsus.** <sup>31</sup> Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

This is certainly one of, if not the most famous religious conversion in history, as Saul, who becomes known as Paul, abandons his former way of life and becomes a follower of Jesus. I want to look this morning at three critical things we learn from this passage about conversion.

1) Nobody is out of the reach of God's grace

One of the great things about the story of Paul's conversion is that the New Testament is filled with his own reflections upon it. One in particular that stands out is:

**1 Timothy 1:12-16** - *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. <sup>13</sup> Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. <sup>14</sup> The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst. <sup>16</sup> But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.*

Perfectly put, Paul. He looks back at his conversion in amazement, and declares that God must have chosen him to show the world that nobody is out of the reach of God's grace. He confesses his violence, his ignorance, his blasphemy, but declares that in God's grace, God revealed himself to Paul, and appointed him to serve him.

If we could make ourselves right with God by being a good person, then there would be many people out there who we could certainly say could never make it to God. But salvation is not by our works but by grace:

**Ephesians 2:8-10** - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- <sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

No one is out of the reach of God's grace, for salvation is not by our good works but a gift of God's grace to undeserving people. Do you feel like you are too far? That you may as well give up? You are never out of God's reach! Salvation is only one prayer away. New life in Christ is yours if you would simply turn in faith to Him, trusting that He died for your sins, and coming to Him as Lord.

**Romans 10:8-9** - *"The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: <sup>9</sup> That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*

No one is too far. Who in your life do you have a hard time believing that God might save? Cry out to God for their salvation this morning!

And just look around the world. Oh, that God would raise up more Pauls! That He would take men who are dictators, violent men, proud men, and humble them, save them, and use them in sacrificial service to others.

## 2) God is pursuing a relationship with everyone

God is clearly the initiator in this relationship with Paul. Paul, while a Pharisee, had concluded that Jesus was a fraud, and that his followers were blasphemers who deserved imprisonment or death. And then Jesus arrested him on the road to Damascus. And Paul finally responded in repentance and faith in Jesus.

Twice in the book of Acts, Luke records Paul testifying to what happened to him on the Damascus road. That is how important Luke felt this experience was. In one place, Paul adds an important detail to the conversation that is not in Acts 9:

*Acts 26:8-15 - Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? <sup>9</sup> "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. <sup>10</sup> And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. <sup>11</sup> Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them. <sup>12</sup> "On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. <sup>13</sup> About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. <sup>14</sup> We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' <sup>15</sup> "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied.*

What does Paul mean when he says that Jesus told him, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads"? My understanding is that a goad was a pointed stick that was used to urge a stubborn farm animal, like an ox, into motion. Occasionally the animal would kick at the goad in anger. But the more the ox kicked, the more the goad would stab them, causing greater pain to the animal. What do you think Jesus meant by using this expression? Jesus seems to be communicating that He has been

pursuing Paul for some time now, but that Paul has been resisting Jesus every step of the way, even if it means hurting himself more. Maybe Paul heard Peter preach on Pentecost. Maybe he had heard the gospel many times from members of the growing church. Maybe when he watched Stephen die, forgiving his persecutors, instead of being transformed by the man's courage and love, he kicked against those goads and became more bitter and violent. Whatever it was, Jesus has been pursuing Paul, and he has been resisting, up until this moment. And Jesus asks Him "Why are you persecuting me?" and tells him that he is only injuring himself by resisting a relationship with God.

God is pursuing a relationship with everyone. As Paul puts it in **1 Timothy 2:3-4** - *This is good, and pleases God our Savior, <sup>4</sup> who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

Some of you may have heard of the 1890 poem by Francis Thompson known as "The Hound of Heaven," where the author lays out how God pursued him and he resisted him, until at last he submitted. It's a long poem, but it begins with these words:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears I hid from Him, and under running laughter. Up vistaed hopes I sped; And shot, precipitated, Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears, From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.*

God is pursuing a relationship with everyone. This is a different perspective for some, who contend that God is not obvious. But the Bible contends that God is much more obvious than you think, that the fault is with us, for we are blind and resistant to the truth.

**Romans 1:18-21** - *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, <sup>19</sup> since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. <sup>20</sup> For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-- his eternal power and divine nature-- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. <sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.*

There are many conversion stories like this, stories where looking back, a person realizes that God was pursuing, but you were resisting, not willing to submit to Him for whatever reason. One modern example is the writer Anne Lamott:

*That April of 1984, in the midst of this experience, Pammy took a fourth urine sample to the lab, and it finally came back positive. I had published three books by then, but none of them had sold particularly well, and I did not have the money or wherewithal to have a baby. The father was someone I had just met, who was married, and no one I wanted a real life or baby with. So Pammy one evening took me in for the abortion, and I was sadder than I'd been since my father died, and when she brought me home that night, I went upstairs to my loft with a pint of Bushmills and some of the codeine a nurse had given me for pain. I drank until nearly dawn.*

*Then the next night I did it again, and the next night, although by then the pills were gone.*

*I didn't go to the flea market the week of my abortion. I stayed home, and smoked dope and got drunk, and tried to write a little, and went for slow walks along the salt marsh with Pammy. On the seventh night, though, very drunk and just about to take a sleeping pill, I discovered that I was bleeding heavily. It did not stop over the next hour. I was going through a pad every fifteen minutes, and I thought I should call a doctor or Pammy, but I was so disgusted that I had gotten so drunk one week after an abortion that I just couldn't wake someone up and ask for help. I kept on changing Kotex, and I got very sober very quickly. Several hours later, the blood stopped flowing, and I got in bed, shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take a sleeping pill. I had a cigarette and turned off the light. After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there—of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this. And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die."*

*I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with.*

*Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning, he was gone.*

*This experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left.*

*And one week later, when I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me.*

*I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, "I quit." I took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in."*

*So this was my beautiful moment of conversion.*

Whether it is the hound of heaven or the cat of heaven, God is pursuing you. He wants a relationship with you. He wants to save you, bless you, give you eternal life. If you would stop and pay attention, you will see His initiative all around you. God is pursuing you. It is hard to kick against the goads. Stop running. Let Him in. Let His love and grace transform you.

3) The call is not just to relationship but to sacrificial service

*<sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. <sup>16</sup> I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."*

God saves Paul, and after he has prepared him, he will send him out to bring the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. Remember that God has told his disciples that they would be his witnesses. Or, as Paul put it:

***2 Corinthians 5:17-21** - Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of **reconciliation**: <sup>19</sup> that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of **reconciliation**. <sup>20</sup> We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making **his appeal through us**. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

When we see how Jesus suffered for us, in order to save us, we find the power to go out and sacrificially love others, so that they might know Christ. When we are transformed by Jesus' sacrificial love that saved us, we count it a blessing to follow in His footsteps and love others.

The conversion of Paul encourages us that because salvation is by grace, that nobody is ever too far from God. We see how God is pursuing all of us, because He loves us and wants life to the fullest for us. And that call includes not just a relationship with Him but becoming part of His mission to sacrificially love our neighbor and point them to Jesus.