

Series: **The Original**
Today's Title: **"Against All Odds"**

August 15, 2021 – Acts 9:1-19

Objective: To encourage us that nobody is so sinful that God cannot redeem them.

Opening prayer

Since the Olympics just finished, I thought I would share an unlikely victory from another Olympic games.

Kerri Strug...

In 1996, Kerri Strug represented the United States women's gymnastics team at the Atlanta Olympics. In the final round of the women's team competition, the Russians held a narrow lead.

Strug was the last to vault and had 2 attempts. If she could earn high marks, the U.S. could complete their comeback. In her first attempt, she landed awkwardly and injured one of her ankles. She didn't know it at the time, but she had a 3rd degree lateral sprang and tendon damage in her ankle.

Due to the bad landing in her 1st vault, she needed to score high on her 2nd vault to secure the gold medal for team USA. Despite telling her coach that she couldn't feel her leg, **and against all odds**, she went on to perfectly land her final vault - scoring 9.712 - and guarantee the team gold for the U.S.

(Source: <https://www.multicaremedicalcenters.com/blog/post/the-five-most-amazing-injury-recoveries-in-sports>)

Alex Smith

In November 2018, quarterback Alex Smith suffered a compound fracture in his right leg - and it looked like (his) career might be done.

He almost died due to the serious infection of flesh-eating bacteria in his leg. But instead of dying he underwent 17 surgeries and rehabbed for nearly two years.

Against all odds - on October 11, 2020, Smith was called into action when quarterback Kyle Allen was injured.

Smith played multiple games during the rest of the 2020 season and was awarded the 2020 comeback player of the year.”

(<https://www.sportingnews.com/us/nfl/news/alex-smith-broken-leg-injury-comeback-story/wikuf6ojjfsq131mepdrcuanb>)

Both of these are amazing stories - unlikely stories.

The **odds were against** Kerri Strug and Alex Smith accomplishing what they did after their injuries - but it happened - what seemed to be against all odds - became a reality.

Our passage today is another unlikely story - a story that was **against all odds**.

However, instead of coming back from an injury, the person in our story has a complete turnaround of their soul.

As a result, the purpose and trajectory of their life is forever changed, and the world would never be the same.

Today's passage is about the radical transformation that God can do in a person.

There is no sinner too sinful...

No tyrant too tyrannical...

No person too evil...

To be beyond the reach of God's love, His grace and forgiveness.

Turn to **Acts 9:1-19** (p. 917)

In **8:1** we read of the great increase of persecution against the Church, and a man by the name of Saul was in full approval and is leading these efforts - going house to house.

Saul was born in Tarsus - a city in the S.E. corner of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey).

Tarsus was a center of education - home to 1 of the 3 major universities in the ancient world - the other 2 being in Alexandria and Athens.

Saul was Jew - who was born and raised in Tarsus - which made him a Hellenistic Jew - Jewish but culturally Greek / Roman.

His father was likely a Pharisee - which is the path Saul had chosen to pursue.

Philippians 3:5

“circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee...”

This was his identity!

Saul was a phenom - a rising star in the 'Pharisee farm leagues' - and probably after he turned 13, he traveled to

Jerusalem - think boarding school - to be trained in the greatest Pharisaic school of his day - the school of Gamaliel.

After years of training, he likely traveled home to Tarsus, which is probably why he never talks of meeting Jesus or hearing Jesus teach. He surely would have mentioned it in his writings if he did encounter Jesus.

However, a short time after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection Saul is back in Jerusalem.

I say short time because the martyrdom of Stephen occurred not very long after the birth of the Church - and it was at Stephen's murder that we are introduced to Saul - at the end of **Acts 7**.

Saul was ruthless. He was an unstoppable zealot for Judaism - and it became his life mission to get rid of all these Jesus followers - to wipe them out.

Why?

Because he was a Pharisee - and he saw the followers of Jesus as blasphemers - as those who opposed the Law of God and proclaimed Jesus to be God.

They had to be stopped...

They had to be shut up...silenced...

They had to be imprisoned - and if necessary, killed.

And this is what he did...for a time.

He was ruthless - and he was determined - and he started arresting anyone - both men and women - who believed in Jesus.

But God had a plan...a different plan for Saul...and as a result, the world would be changed forever.

Against all odds - this persecutor of the Church would live the rest of his life proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Savior.

In fact, we're here today - in large part - because of what we read in our passage today.

Look with me at **Acts 9:1-2**.

Saul's attack against the Church. vs. 1-2

We read in **8:3** that "...Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison."

His pillaging of the Church - of the Christians in Jerusalem was not enough. So, he expands his pursuit to other towns and cities.

Read vs. 1-2

Damascus was 160 miles North of Jerusalem - which points to how zealous Saul was to track down these Jesus followers.

"still breathing threats" - in the Greek, "breathing" is a word that means to *'breathe in'*.

Some Bible translations say he was "breathing out" his threats.

But the word means *'breath in'*.

What the significance of *'breathe in'*?

We breathe in oxygen to exist - to live.

Saul's existence - the energy in his life - his life motivation was to extinguish followers of Jesus from this earth.

He wanted to make sure they couldn't influence anyone to believe what they were claiming.

Saul gets letters of extradition which likely included legal charges against anyone "belonging to the Way".

With letters in hand - and a contingent of guards and other legal officials, he sets off for Damascus - a city known as a refuge for Christians fleeing from Jerusalem.

But this would be his last Christian hunting trip.

Saul's conversion vs. 3-9

Nobody is beyond the saving power of God.

Read vs. 3-9

As they were approaching Damascus, a "light from heaven flashed around him."

This knocks him to the ground - and he hears a voice.

His companions hear a voice, but see nobody.

The voice asks him a simple question.

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

Saul asks “Who are You Lord?” - the reply is “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

I believe at this very moment - Saul’s entire world - his entire world-view - his theological understanding - his understanding of Scripture - has just been turned inside-out and upside-down.

This is a dramatic account of a conversion to Christianity - of an extraordinary man who would be the 13th Apostle.

An appearance of Jesus would be necessary for Saul to become an Apostle - and we could also say it was necessary to destroy his false views and beliefs about Jesus and His followers.

God rocks his world - because God will use him to change the world by bringing the message of Jesus to the Gentiles.

Saul was blinded by the encounter - so his entourage helps him to Damascus and he obeys what he was told to do - wait for further instructions.

For the next 3 days he waits...prays...and neither eats nor drinks.

Why the fasting?

Fasting is a spiritual discipline.

He is fasting because his life has just been laid waste - and he is seeking God - repenting from his sins.

His mind is reeling as he is putting the pieces together of what it means that Jesus - is not only resurrected - but He appeared to him in a vision.

Saul was the kind of guy who knew everything - he was fully convinced - likely overflowing with spiritual pride and intellectual arrogance.

All of that is now crushed.

He is humbled - like never before in his life.

He waits - fully dependent on the mercy and grace of God - concepts he's not very familiar with yet.

He's blind - in a foreign city - his entourage have likely left him - he's alone.

He's praying and fasting.

Ananias obeys God's alarming command. *vs. 10-19*

Sometimes God calls us to do things...or not do things... which are a bit scary - alarming.

We know that if we obey, we may face opposition.

Obedience means we will be exposed - set apart - different.

Obedience may mean sacrifice - persecution - rejection.

This was what a man named Ananias faced.

Read vs. 10-19

Ananias was a disciple of Jesus - living in Damascus.

Many believe he was a leader among the Christians there in Damascus.

Frankly, we don't know anything about him beyond these verses.

Stop and think for a moment.

In the scheme of things, Ananias doesn't do great, immense, grand things for the kingdom.

He doesn't travel to all parts of the world, plating churches, proclaiming the Gospel, or doing anything that we're aware of on a large scale which impacted hundreds or thousands of people.

But Ananias is a hero of the Church - because he was obedient to go visit - befriend - and show kindness and grace to the greatest enemy of the Church.

But this great enemy would be used by God to reach thousands - and over history millions upon millions for the cause of Christ - for the Gospel.

There have been hundreds and hundreds - thousands of Ananias' throughout the history of the Church.

We usually don't know their actual names - what they did - but we know God used them to impact someone with the Gospel - and that someone was used by God to reach hundreds and thousands.

Think of the anonymous influencers who God used to impact men and women of faith over the centuries.

Martin Luther

John Calvin

The Wesley brothers	Elizabeth Elliott
D.L. Moody	Amy Carmichael
C.S. Lewis	Harriet Tubman
Billy Graham	Fanny Crosby
Tony Evans	Catherine Booth
Luis Palau	Corrie Ten Boom
Chuck Swindoll	Joni Eareckson-Tada
Andy Stanley	

Christian singers, artists, authors, pastors, teachers, theologians, archeologists.

When you serve in Next Gen ministry - when you work with our kids or students and let God use you to impact those lives with the Gospel.

When you join a small group and pray for those in the group - ask questions in a discussion - invite the group over for dinner or for the game and simply befriend others and grace them - you never know how God will use your influence.

Ananias had no idea what this cruel, evil persecutor of his fellow Christians would do - how God would use him - but his kindness and grace was the beginning of an incredible turnaround - a extremely unlikely transformation which was **against all odds**.

Ananias was likely the one who baptized Saul.

That's gonna be a pretty cool story to hear when we're in heaven.

'Ananias...tell us the story of when you first met Saul - and when you baptized him.'

Notice the urgency of Saul's baptism! (Sept. 19 - Back to Church Sunday)

He refers to Saul as "brother Saul".

He's no longer an enemy - he's now a friend...a member of the family...part of the community of believers.

After Saul was baptized, he ate, drank, and stayed in Damascus "for some days" with the other Christians in Damascus.

Those would have been interesting gatherings as their greatest enemy was now in the same room, praying and talking about the crucified and resurrected Jesus and the forgiveness we have in Him.

Saul's new life mission. vs. 15-16

God has turned Saul's life inside-out and upside-down.

He has laid waste to Saul's plans.

Almost everything Saul believed - everything he had committed his life to - was now gone...shown to be false by the resurrected Jesus.

The fact that there was a resurrected Jesus was the explosive truth that blew up his life plans.

Now, instead of attacking the Church and persecuting followers of Christ, he would proclaim the good news of Christ and be used of God to bring people to put their faith in Christ and follow Christ.

He was changing sides - a complete and total transformation.

- He was playing for the Cubs - now he's playing for the White Sox.
- He was a Republican - now he's a Democrat.
- He was a socialist - now he's a free-market capitalist.
- He was a Wildcat - now he's a Sun Devil!

vs. 15-16 - But the Lord said to him (Ananias), "Go, for he (Saul) is a chosen instrument of Mine to carry My name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of My name."

The same thing has happened to every Christian.

What you were...you're not anymore.

What you used to be...you're now someone / something else.

Your old self / old life is gone...your new life has come.

You are a new creation - with a new nature.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

"Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually

immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

The internal reality of Saul’s faith in Christ.

Numerous times in various letters he wrote which were inspired by the Holy Spirit - which make up a large portion of the N.T., he would write of his transformation from ‘Persecutor of Christians’ to ‘Promoter of Christ’.

Acts 26:9-11

“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

10 And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them.

11 And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”

1 Timothy 1:12-16

“I thank Him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because He judged me faithful, appointing me to His service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.

But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

16 But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life.

Philippians 3:7-11

“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith--

that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

Apply it...

Christian...

We are all saved by grace.

Nobody is saved by their own merit.

Some of you may think you were a good, moral person - so God only needed to give you a little ‘nudge’ to get you over the salvation finish line.

Not true!!

“None is righteous, no, not one...” - Romans 3:10

“...all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.” - Isaiah 64:6

“while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son...” - Romans 5:10

Give thanks - have a heart of gratitude - erase all spiritual pride - worship with an accurate understanding of how God rescued you from yourself!

Get baptized on Sept. 19 if you haven't been baptized after putting your faith in Jesus!

Not a Christian...yet

Have you been resisting God?

Trying to live a good, moral life - even succeeding at living a good, moral life - is not enough.

Why is it not enough?

Because we can't be good enough - can't be perfect.

Our good doesn't take away our bad.

When you put your faith in Jesus - when you believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins - God will forgive everything!

He will forgive all of your sins - past, present, future.

But He doesn't stop there.

He doesn't just wipe your slate clean.

He doesn't just take away your sins.

He doesn't see you as 'sin-free' and morally neutral - no bad marks.

He gives you (imputes) the righteousness of Jesus!

In a judicial sense - after faith - when God looks at you - He doesn't see any sins - they are gone - pardoned - paid for.

He sees righteousness - the righteousness of His Son!

Put your faith in Jesus today - right now.

Get baptized on Sept. 19.

Close in prayer