

Good morning, Union Church. If we haven't had a chance to meet yet, my name is Kyle Rodriguez, I'm one of the pastors here, and it's my privilege to preach the Word to you this morning.

One of the things we've seen, as we've worked through the Book of Acts, especially in the last few weeks, is that in the early church, people were converted to Christianity. That is, they turned from a previous way of life into something new.¹

Now, in our culture today, I think we think about religion through a couple lenses, but often the language of "conversion" makes us uncomfortable. In our culture, I think we most often think about religion as either something we "identify" with or as a set of practices or beliefs that we take up—perhaps even just seasonally or for periods of our life. Another way to say it is that religion is either an identity marker, just another group we see ourselves as a part of, or it is a set of external beliefs and practices that we "take up" as we see fit.

But, as Tim Keller once said, Christianity is not something that you "take up", it is something that takes you up!²

Christianity is a "converting" religion. Another way this is talked about in the New Testament is through the phrase "born again. Jesus says "unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." That is to say, becoming a Christian, converting, being saved, is a whole life thing. It's like being born again a completely new person. It is not just an additional set of beliefs that you take and tack on to your previous state of being, like taking up yoga as a hobby. It is a converting religion.

And in Acts, we see this "conversion" happen again and again. And today, we're looking at what is probably the most famous conversion account in the Bible, that of Saul of Tarsus, or Paul (I'll probably refer to him as both throughout this sermon).

And in a lot of ways, Paul's conversion is extremely unique: Most of us were not blinded as Jesus spoke to us on a dusty road on our way to persecute Christians. But at the same time, Paul's conversion is meant to be a model! Listen to what Paul himself says in 1 Timothy: **"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."**

Paul's conversion is an example, something to be looked back upon by future believers to understand what Jesus does and how he does it.

So, this is important for all of us. Whether you are here and you haven't been converted, you think you're a Christian and you're really not, or you are a Christian, you have been converted—you need to know how Jesus saves sinners! You need to know it so you can recognize when it's happening, so you can praise God when he works miracles, so you can

¹ In fact, in the Bible, in the original language, the word for "convert" and the word for "turn" are the same word: στρέφω (*strepheo*).

² "Converted by the Resurrection" by Tim Keller. Preached on Nov. 23, 2003.

have assurance for what he has done for you, there are countless reasons why each and every one of us need this, so, let's go to Acts 9 together, but before we do, let's pray and ask the Lord to "display his perfect patience" to us today.

So, here's what we're going to do. We're going to look at five elements of Paul's journey in chapter 9, five elements of what happens when Jesus Christ saves sinners. We're going to look at these five elements by looking at five different postures that Paul takes on during this story.

I. Up on his High Horse

The first position in which we see Paul is *up on his high horse*. Now, we don't know whether or not Paul was riding a horse. There's no mention of one here or in any of the other recounting by Paul of this journey. But, Paul almost certainly was in a place of pride and arrogance—up on his metaphorical high horse.

If you remember, back at the beginning of chapter 8, we were first introduced to Saul. Saul had seen what was essentially a mob lynching of Stephen, he'd approved of it, and then become what seems to be the point person for a great persecution of the church. And here chapter 9 we come back to Saul. Let's read the first two verses of chapter 9 together:

"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."

Now we don't have time this morning to dig into all the background here, but two things are really clear about Paul. If you read through his letters and you read through Acts, two things are clear:

1. He was sincere. He was sincere in his desire to worship God. He was zealous. He thought he was doing the right thing. He was sincere.
2. And the second thing we find out is that Paul was successful. He was a rising star among the Pharisees. What he was doing was working at least in his eyes and in the eyes of the broader community around him. Not just the persecution, but Paul's general life, both in regards to religion and his general achievement and comfort and self-confidence.

He was sincere and he was successful. And yet sincerity and success are not necessarily measures of faithfulness.

And so if you're here today, and, you are sincere in your religiosity, your life is comfortable or somewhat successful, that is not necessarily a marker that you are on the right path. In fact, you

could say, that if life seems to be going great, if you feel like you are doing all the right things to keep it together, that is probably the most dangerous place that you can be.

There is no more dangerous state to be in than feeling as if you've got it all together, like you are doing all the right things. Because, very possibly, your reliance on your own ability to succeed is actually distracting you from the actual state of your soul.

Self-confidence is not the measure of faithfulness. You can be quite self-confident on your way to hell.

Now, the good news, if you're here and you are a Christian, and you're praying for the salvation of your loved ones, of your community, the good news is that the Lord can work even when there are no external hints. He can save even the most stubborn, self-confident sinners in the blink of an eye. There were no hints to the church that Saul, their great persecutor, was about to be saved!

You have no idea when the Lord will save the people you have long given up on. So, keep praying, keep looking for opportunities to witness. God may work in the moment you least expect it.

II. Down on His Knees

Now, the second posture we see Paul in is *down on his knees*. And he's on his knees not because he's had a string of bad luck, or because he's had some sort of crisis. He's on his knees because he encounters the living God.

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. 4 And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" 5 And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

Now, if you've been around here for a while, you probably recognize the basic elements of an encounter with God that are present here. We've looked at these encounters before, like in Isaiah 6, where Isaiah has a vision of the throne room of God, or of Matthew 17 and the Transfiguration of Jesus, or Revelation 1 when John has a vision of heaven. And in all of them, these elements of an intense, heavenly light that followed by the person experiencing God's presence falling to their knees—almost instinctively, not able to look up into the face of God—this is a "theophany", when God shows up, when the veil between heaven and earth, spiritual and physical suddenly becomes torn. An awesome, but terrifying moment.

But something is different here: Paul says: "Who are you, Lord?" Surely, Paul has a sense that this is a divine encounter, but he's confused. It's not what he expected. There's something he can't quite put his finger on. And it is probably because of what the figure says: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

Saul doesn't think he's persecuting God. He thinks he's on God's side, zealous for the things of God, eager and passionate to defend God. But now God has shown up, and he says that Paul is persecuting him, essentially he says that he is his enemy! And he says that his name is Jesus.

When I was in seminary, I had a professor who assigned us a paper, which then turned into a class debate, on the topic "Do Christians, Muslims, and Jews worship the same God?" And we had some people on either side (it was a very interesting set of students in that class), we had pretty rigorous discussion. But, I can distinctly remember one point in the class debate, when the professor—who had played a kind of impartial mediator for most of the session—finally showed his hand and he said, with a kind of look like he knew he was going to get us all stumped: "Did the Apostle Paul worship a different God before the Damascus road than he did after? Do you think Paul was trying to worship a different God before and after his conversion? Don't you think that the Apostle Paul, who was so zealous in his love for God, would say that he wasn't worshipping a new God, but that he was worshipping the same God who had just revealed more about himself than Paul understood before?"

But I don't think that lines up with what we know about Paul. Paul wasn't just worshipping the true God in the wrong way, Paul was worshipping a different God altogether: he was worshipping a God of his own mind, a God of his own creation. Listen to what Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:12-13:

"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."

He goes on to say he had acted "ignorantly in unbelief." That is to say, because of his unbelief, he was ignorant of the true God! He was ignorant of true worship, true service, true righteousness, because he was ignorant of God himself! He had worshipped not God, but a God of his own making.

See, Paul, like most of us, had assumed quite a bit about God. If I can piece together some of the Jewish misconceptions of the day and some of Paul's hints from his letters, I think Paul probably thought:

1. That God was one, above and other than his creation, and for a human to call himself the Son of God, like Jesus did—was blasphemy to the highest degree.
2. That God would never destroy the temple and the sacrificial systems—for that was how one earned his right to be a part of God's kingdom. Paul probably thought that the law, all of the law, was the way to prove oneself righteous and good, and that Jesus's claim that he would destroy the temple, that he was the only way to the Father, that was utter nonsense, nothing like God.
3. And Paul probably thought that to die shamefully on a cross was to be cursed by God—and the Messiah, the Christ—would be one who would be blessed by God, sent to vindicate Israel and destroy her enemies. God would not send a Messiah to die, to be cursed.

See, Paul had a certain conception of God, and it was that conception of God, a product of his own mind, that he worshipped, that he was zealous for. In his mind, he was earnest, he was sincere, but in reality, he was worshipping a false God, he was a blasphemer, a persecutor, a violent opponent of God.

But now, he has encountered the true God in the person of Jesus Christ. The false messiah he thought dead is alive, and he's confronted him in all his heavenly glory—this shatters his entire view of the universe and reality. He has encountered the real God.

So, the question for us is: Have you encountered the real God? Because if you've only ever encountered a God of your own making, one that comes from your own mind, your own belief of what you think God should be like, then all of your sincerity is meaningless. **If you've never encountered something about God that you don't like—then you probably haven't encountered the real God. If you've never been convicted and challenged by the real God, you probably are worshipping a God of your own making.**

And look, as painful, humbling, and terrifying as this idea is, it is incredibly good news. This is something I learned from Tim Keller, and it's so helpful: If the God you worship is simply a creation of your own heart, your own desires, your own thoughts, then that's a God that cannot help you—because he is of you. He's your creation. He can't lift you up, make you something new—because he's a product of your self—in a sense, all he is is yourself, or some idealized reflection of yourself. A god that is a product of ourselves can't help us any more than an infant can get themselves milk in the middle of the night. We need something outside of ourselves, greater than ourselves, to intercede and save us.³

So, if you haven't encountered the real God—the God who has revealed himself in his Word and ultimately in his Son—then you haven't been converted. You just have some religious impulses about a God “out there.”

But if you have: if you've been driven to your knees because you've encountered a God that is infinitely greater than you could have imagined, infinitely more holy than you ever could be, a God who is best known through the unfathomable, mysterious person of Jesus Christ, both God and man, eternal God yet crucified by men, innocently holy yet cursed by a righteous God, victorious in suffering and death, if you have met that God, well, then something's happening. On it's own, that doesn't mean you're saved, but you're no longer stumbling around in the dark: a light has begun to shine.

III. Blind and Hungry

But, encountering God is just one piece of the conversion puzzle. Because Satan has encountered the living God. The demons know what God is really like in ways we can't comprehend.

³ Again, see “Converted by the Resurrection” by Keller.

So, it has to be more than simply encountering the real God. So, let's keep reading. Jesus continues to speak to Paul in verse 6:

“But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

This is the third posture we see Paul in: *blind and hungry*.

This is a part of the story that I am fascinated with. It's not a part of the story I usually think about. When I think about this story, I think about the miraculous encounter on the road, I don't think about the three long days of darkness and hunger. **Paul is blind and without food or drink for three straight days.**

Can you imagine that? Can you imagine being Paul for those three days? He's just had his entire world shaken. He's had his entire conception of God and his state as a righteous, godly man shaken. He's been told that he is an enemy, a persecutor of God and struck blind.

And now he's sitting in the dark, and all he can do is think. What a terrifying idea.

How many of you have been in that spot: When all of the sudden the reality of God and his righteous judgment has come upon you in a terrifying way? When the reality and horror of your sin has come to bear upon you in a paralyzing way? When you've seen the absolute destruction that you have wrought and it haunts you? When everything you thought you knew about God and knew about yourself has been upended? When you can no longer fix it, when you've hit bottom and all you can do is think about it... what do you do? Well, let's keep reading.

(v. 10) Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying.

Stop right there. In the midst of his lowest moment, realizing the worst possible thing about himself and the most shocking thing about reality, Paul is *praying*. What do you think he's praying?

Now, I don't know for sure *what* Paul is praying in this moment. But I think Paul gives us a hint in the book of Philippians. See, in Philippians 3, Paul describes his previous confidence in the flesh, I had more! I had all the external markers of righteousness, success, achievement! Nobody could blame me for the utmost self-confidence. But now all of that has been shattered.

And this is what Paul says next, in Philippians 3:

“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 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 9 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— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Do you know what I think Paul was praying during those three days? I think he was praying that.

I think he was praying: “God, everything I thought my life was built upon is worth nothing! Everything I thought I knew about you, everything I thought I could accomplish, it’s nothing! I see now the risen Jesus, and I would give up everything I have to know him. All of the Law makes sense to me now, the prophecies make sense to me. I don’t a righteousness that comes from the law, but I need one that comes from you! Even in the mere moments that I have been in Jesus’ presence I can recognize that he is the one I must know! All I want is to become his, to know him and the power of his resurrection. Lord, I am dead and everything I am and have done is leading me on the path to death: I will do anything, I will give everything to attain life, to attain the resurrection of Jesus Christ! Have mercy on me, God!”

Look, if the first piece of conversion is this encounter, getting this grand view of God, with God that blows away the tiny, limited view of God that we might naturally concoct on our own, then the second piece of real conversion is not just the high view of God, but the low view of ourselves, it’s this coming to see our sin, coming to see how broken we are. Coming to this point, where Paul is: totally desperate.

It’s only in seeing *both* our own inability God’s, great and grand and glorious reality, that we recognize that we need something to bridge the gap. And Jesus is the one to bridge the gap.

To recognize your own blindness and to feel the hunger pangs of wanting more, of wanting God, of wanting communion with him, of wanting that eternal life that he offers: that is the sweet spot! It’s only in that that desperation where the miracle of conversion happens.

That’s the beauty of Paul’s conversion. See, it is a grace that Jesus leaves him in this place for three days. And it is a grace for you when Jesus places you in a place of desperation. That he leaves you there for an extended period of time. If you have never been in a place where you have felt blind and hungry and empty, if you have never been in a place where you see the destruction that your sin has wrought and your own inability to fix it, if you never been in a place, where all you could do was cry out: “Lord, have mercy. I want you. I need you. I can’t do it on my own. Have mercy on me.”

If you’ve never been there, then you, you’ve never experienced conversion. You never experienced grace. You’ve never experienced the reality of, the glory of, Christianity.

But if you have been there, if you have been at the lowest of the low, the place where all you could do was cry out. If you have been there, Oh, brother and sister. That is a grace. To be blind, to recognize that you are blind and hungry is a grace. Because the good news of Jesus is he will not leave you there.

IV. Reconciled and Baptized

See, after the Lord gently prods Ananias and assures him that this is his plan, to save this enemy of the church, Ananias goes to Paul. And he says to him (verse 17):

“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

In Acts 22, when Paul is verbally recounting this moment, he adds a few more of Ananias’ words. He says:

“The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.”

Oh, don’t you see the glory of everything that God does here for Paul?

He assures him:

- You’ve been reconciled with the God of your fathers, the God you thought you were serving but were actually blaspheming.
- You’ve been reconciled with his Son, the Righteous One, whom you were persecuting, because you’ve seen him, heard his voice, and now may be baptized in his name.
- You’ve been reconciled with the Church, whom you tormented, the body of Christ, and been received into their fellowship.
- You’ve been reconciled with real purpose—redeemed from one who did violence and evil and called to divine purpose in witnessing to the glorious message of reconciliation in Jesus for the rest of your life.

For three days, Paul waited, hungered alone in the dark, accosted by his guilt and shame—and here, in an instant, he is assured of his forgiveness, reconciliation—both to God and his people—because of the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

V. Boldly Proclaiming

And now, Paul is equipped for ministry. That’s the fifth and final position we see Paul in in this chapter: **boldly proclaiming**.

Look at what happens in verse 19-20:

For some days he was with the disciples in Damascus. 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 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?” But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

And the rest of the chapter, essentially, paints a picture of how Paul was increasingly reconciled with the Church and increasingly effective in his astounding witness for Jesus Christ.

See, God always converts people for purpose. From the beginning, Paul has been chosen for this work of witnessing to Christ.

God didn't save him and then think: “Hmmm, now that he's chosen to become a Christian, how can I use him?” No, God saved him because he had purpose in mind for him. And not just any purpose. He had people in mind. He had you in mind.

Most of us in this room are not ethnically Jewish, most of us in this room have heard and believed the Gospel precisely because on that road 2,000 years ago, Jesus appeared to Paul, knocked him onto his knees, showed him the ugliness of his sin, and then three days later confirmed to him the glory of forgiveness in his name. And from that moment on, Paul was launched into ministry that brought the gospel outside of the Jewish community to the far reaches of the Roman Empire, where it would spread to Africa and India and Europe and eventually to the United States and all the way to Howell, MI in 2023. God saved Paul with a purpose in mind, and the purpose was you! And you and you and me!

And if you've had the experience of seeing the real God in Jesus Christ, seeing your sin in all its ugliness, and being reconciled to God in peace that surpasses understanding because you've placed all your hopes in the work of Jesus Christ—if you've been born again to new life—then he had purpose in mind for you too.

And that purpose is the same for you as it was for Paul, as it was for the disciples at the beginning of Acts 1: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

The purpose of Paul's salvation was your salvation. The purpose of your salvation is somebody else's.

This is the end point of conversion: That by our witness, we might make disciples of Jesus Christ for the glory of God and the joy of all peoples.