

Two Unlikely Converts - Easter 2022

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[0 : 00] It is my pleasure to worship the Lord Jesus Christ with you this morning. Being a young man who grew up as a teenager in the 80s, I enjoyed watching someone play NBA basketball.

His name was Spud Webb. He was the shortest player who has ever played in the NBA. He totaled a total of, he cleared 5'6".

And he won in 1986 the Slam Dunk Contest for the NBA. And the middle picture shows him in the middle with all the other contestants that year.

He was, if you will, someone who was unlikely to ever play at that level. He was unlikely to play in the NBA.

And I loved watching him seemingly make, his opponents make fools of themselves trying to stop him. And I just, I just enjoyed watching him play.

[1 : 03] Today we're going to look at this Easter morning two individuals who are unlikely disciples. They are unlikely disciples. They're unlikely to ever follow Jesus Christ.

And so if you have your Bible with you this morning, I would love for us to look at our texts together. We're going to look at 1 Corinthians chapter 15. I want us to read verses 1 through 11.

So if you have your Bible with you, 1 Corinthians 15, 1 through 11. After 14 chapters of rebuke, Paul then turns to the church at Corinth.

And this is what he says. This is a word of the Lord. Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel that I preached to you, what you received and which you stand.

And by which you are being saved. If you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.

[2 : 13] And that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures. And that he appeared to Cephas, that is Peter, and then to the twelve. And then he appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.

Then he appeared to James, then he and then to the apostles. The last of all, as one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and by his grace toward me I have, was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I but the grace of God that is in within me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

And that's our text for today. And we find two unlikely believers. We find two unlikely converts. The first one I want us to draw our attention to, and if you were with us on Good Friday and Sunrise Service this morning, you know that we have taken this text through verse six.

[3 : 31] And so we're going to just pick up this in this message starting in verse seven. James. Why is James an unlikely convert?

Why would James place his faith in Christ? Why would I say that he is an unlikely convert? And I want you to see that what it is that was the instrument that changed things for James was seeing the resurrected Christ.

If you look in this text, it says in verse five, he appeared to Cephas, then in verse six, he appeared to the 500. And then it says, and then he appeared to James that seeing the resurrected Christ changed everything for James.

But let's remind ourselves who James is. He is the half-brother of Jesus. He's the half-brother because Jesus was conceived not by Joseph, but by the Holy Spirit.

Joseph and Mary would go on then to have their own biological children of whom James is one. James and Jesus then grew up in the same household, parented by Joseph and Mary.

[4 : 43] Imagine how difficult it would be for his brothers to believe that your brother is the long-awaited for Messiah. He is the hope of Israel.

He is the one Israel has been waiting for since Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is the promised one, the one who would sit on David's throne. That's your brother.

And to see his reception in his family, I want us to look here on the screen. There's a verse in John seven. In John chapter six, we know that many followers of Jesus had left Jesus now.

They've abandoned him. And so the brothers of Jesus capitalize on this moment as others are not following Jesus any longer.

It says this, and after Jesus went to Galilee, he would not go into Judea, that is where Jerusalem is located, because the Jews were seeking to kill him.

[5 : 45] And now the Jews' feast of booths was at hand. And so his brothers said to him, leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples may see the works that you are doing, for no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly.

If you do these things, show yourself to the world, for not even his brothers believed in him. Can you hear the tone in which they're saying that?

Jesus knows that people are out to kill him. He's not going to Jerusalem, the city of Jerusalem yet, or he's not going there, but the feast of booths is happening there.

And so his brothers say, hey, look, if you want followers, I know people are not following you, but go to Jerusalem, participate in the feast or the festival of booths, feast of booths.

You should do that, because if these things are true of you and you do miracles, people will follow you. But they really were mocking him, because it says for not even his brothers believed in him.

[6 : 46] And James is one of them. But you think, well, what do Joseph and Mary think of Jesus? What does James' parents know about Jesus?

Do they know who he is? Let's remind ourselves what Matthew's account is concerning Joseph. Joseph, he learned that his betrothed Mary was pregnant with child, and he was an upright man, and he didn't want to put her to open shame.

And so he was seeking to divorce her quietly and break off this betrothal. And then the word of the Lord says this, but as he, Joseph, was considering these things, behold an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sin.

So what does Joseph know in this angelic pronouncement about his soon, his wife's child? That it's declared who this child is.

[8 : 16] The child born to Mary was conceived by the Holy Spirit. That's who the child is. This is also the gender reveal party.

It will be a boy. She will have a son who needs an ultrasound when you have an angelic announcement. Joseph also learns the name.

You should call him Jesus. And Joseph knows Jesus' mission. You save his people from their sin. Joseph, James's dad, knows who your brother is.

What about mom? What about Mary? Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, came to Mary and said, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

And behold, he will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the son of the most high.

[9 : 17] And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father, David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. And his kingdom, there will be no end.

So now, consider being James, the half-brother of Jesus. James, your birth announcement didn't come by an angel to your parents.

For James, you did not have an angelic gender reveal party. For James, your birth wasn't foretold of Old Testament prophets. For James, you were not the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.

For James, no, you are not the sibling that was going to be given the throne of David. You are not the sibling who would reign over the house of Jacob. You are not the sibling whose kingdom will have no end.

You will not be the sibling who will be great. You are not the sibling that was given a name by your parents, by angels to your parents.

[10:19] No, you were just given a name whatever they conjured up in their mind. You didn't have a foreordained mission for your life like to save people from their sins.

And I'm just getting started. You were not the sibling who was perfect, who never sinned, who never talked back to your parents, who never rolled your eyes in frustration, who never lied, never spoke a word that didn't offer life to its hearers, even a rebuke if he did offers life.

You were not the one who never had a sinful thought. And Jesus's motives were always pure, always lovely. Jesus was without sin, and that's your brother.

Joseph and Mary even perhaps quietly thought, oh, I wish James would be more like his brother, Jesus. You were not the sibling who grew in wisdom and stature beyond your contemporaries.

No, that was your brother, Jesus. You were not the one who taught in the synagogue as a youth and everyone sat in amazement at your teacher, at your teaching. No, that was your brother, Jesus.

[11:28] You were not the one of the 12 disciples. You were not the, you were not one of the 12 disciples who hung on every word that you spoke.

Your parents, when they were in a bind, they didn't seek you out. No, they sought Jesus. Hey, we're running out of wine, water into wine.

That was your brother, Jesus. Is it not hard to conceive why the text said, for not even his brothers believed in him?

But everything changed for James. Everything changed. And Paul, what he writes here, he says, and then he appeared to James and then the apostles, that seeing his resurrected brother changed everything for James and he then believed all that was said about his brother.

He understood why his brother died and all the reasons why it was told why his brother died, all the reasons why he was buried for three days. And now he sees his resurrected brother and believes everything changed, seeing the resurrected Christ for James.

[12:55] And we're told of the account when one account when James saw his resurrected brother. We don't know if this is the account that Paul is writing of in 1 Corinthians, but we know this that after Jesus rose from the grave, he appeared to many.

And then as he's ascended, he tells the disciples the great commission and the book of Acts, it sounds like, and you will be my disciples in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the world in Acts 1.8.

A few verses later, Acts 1.14, this is what we read. And all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer and they're waiting for the Holy Spirit together with the women and the Mary, the mother of Jesus and his brothers.

And there's James. He had seen the resurrected Lord. He even probably was one who saw the ascended Lord as he was taken into heaven.

He saw the resurrected Lord and everything changed. There's yet another unlikely disciple in our text today.

[14:03] And it goes into the next verse in verse 8. And last of all, Paul writes, as the one untimely born, he appeared to me. He appeared to the apostle Paul, a former persecutor of the church.

Think about why it may be difficult, why it's unlikely that Paul would place his faith in Christ.

Paul was a Jew, he was born of the tribe of Benjamin. He was born in Tarsus. He grew up in Tarsus, that is modern day Turkey. Paul was likely born, he was born a Roman citizen, so his family likely possessed some wealth and standing.

Paul was at the age of five. He began his studies of scripture intently at the synagogue under some rabbi there in the city of Tarsus. He would have likely had the first five books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, memorized by the age of 10.

He would have grown in his understanding of the Old Testament, the Torah, the law, the prophets, the writings. And he was groomed in the trade at this time of age 10, and we know that Paul was a tent maker.

[15:20] And so then, at age of 13, either his parents moved to Jerusalem, or Paul was sent to Jerusalem, because he was a promising young man.

And he wanted to direct his studies at a more able rabbi, and so he went to Jerusalem. And he was taken under the tutelage of a man whose name was Gamiliel, and he was the grandson of the great rabbi Hillel.

And Gamiliel was the greatest of rabbis that you could study under in the first century there in Jerusalem, and Paul was one of his students. For we read and acts.

Paul writes of this. He says, I was brought up in the city of Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel, educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers. Paul had this incredible education, this incredible rabbinic study.

Paul was a young theologian. He came to excel over all of his contemporaries, and he became extremely zealous in the tradition of his fathers.

[16:31] We read this in Galatians. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people. So extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

This is Paul's own account as he's writing to the church at Galatian. Paul was brilliant. He had a brilliant mind. If you had an argument contrary to the God's law, he would have a readied answer. He was among the best and the brightest, and he knew it. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. His training qualified him and surpassed all of the other Pharisees.

He was a Pharisee of Pharisees. He was zealous for the law of God. He had no patience for detractors, which led him to persecute the church.

They were detracting from Judaism, from the law of God. They were teaching false things in Paul's mind and his understanding. And so you see Paul at Stephen's stoning giving consent to that, and everyone who picks up a stone lays their garments at Paul's feet as they pick up stones to kill Stephen.

[17:42] Paul wasn't converted at Stephen's sermon prior to his stoning. No. He was consenting to it. He wanted to quiet anyone who spoke differently than his understanding.

He was a part of the first cancel culture. Paul was not convicted by Stephen's sermon. He knew better than Stephen. Paul was not moved by others stoning the man teaching differently.

Paul justified his actions and the actions of those who stoned him and his mind deeming Stephen one who is deserving of death for teaching others about the resurrected Christ.

Paul led the church in persecuting the fleeing Christians out of Jerusalem. It didn't matter to Paul. You can run, but you cannot hide, because the next thing we know, we see Paul in an account.

He's on the road to Damascus because he hears there's Christians in Damascus, and he goes with letters of extradition in hand to the church at Damascus, and he's going to round those guys up and bring them to justice, which either meant jail time or more stoning.

[18:54] And he was going to go get them, and on that road, he met the resurrected Christ. You know the story on the road to Damascus, bright light shown blinded Paul, and he hears this voice, Paul, Paul, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

And meeting the resurrected Christ changed everything for Paul. Everything.

So I have some questions. What about us today? Could there be a James or a Paul among us? James grew up with Jesus. What about you? I see James as one whose proximity to Jesus blinded him to faith in Christ.

Jesus' James lived under the same household. His proximity to Jesus didn't help him draw him to Christ, but it actually blinded him to his faith in Christ.

[20:06] And please, there are many today who have grown up in Christian homes, who heard about Jesus, read the Bible stories, perhaps even memorized verses, sang inquires, went through a confirmation process at the church, were baptized, maybe even as an infant, and you think I am close to Jesus because of my proximity.

I could tell you about Jesus, but that is not what saves you. Proximity to Jesus is not what saves you.

Salvation is believing in Jesus Christ, in his person and his work, in his sinless life, his death for sin on a cross.

He was buried and three days later he rose from the grave and we'll tell, we're going to share a little bit about why the resurrection is so important. And meeting the resurrected Christ changes everything.

What saddens me is I have a close family friend. No. I'm related to this person. They're in my family.

[21:25] This person grew up in a Christian home. This person has a beautiful voice and can play the piano wonderfully. This person loves the hymns.

This person in my family is even paid by churches to play the piano and lead the congregation in hymns and to sing worship to a God she personally doesn't even believe.

She has been close to Jesus her whole life, yet out of the testimony of her whole mouth, she doesn't believe in the deity of Christ. She doesn't believe that Jesus is God.

She doesn't believe many things that lead someone to salvation. She has never met the resurrected Christ. And yet she is close to Jesus and has been her whole life.

And yet she is so far away. Has the proximity to Jesus for you led you to faith in Christ? Or just simple mental acknowledgement of the facts about God and Jesus Christ?

[22 : 28] The second person is Paul. I put him in two categories. He's an intellectual skeptic prior to meeting the resurrected Christ.

He had a brilliant mind. He was well studied. He could outwit any of his contemporaries. He could stump so many people with his questions.

He might even make sport of unconvincing the converted. And so perhaps you are here today and you fancy yourself as an intellectual skeptic.

You know better. And my prayer is that you would come face to face with the reality of the resurrected Christ.

What do you do with that? Later in our chapter Paul writes a rather stunning verse for he says, And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sin.

[23 : 32] Meeting the resurrected Christ, the resurrected Christ means everything. Otherwise we would still be in our sin. Or perhaps you are an unworthy sinner. Paul also is an unworthy sinner.

Or if you notice in our text, why does he say that he's the least of the apostles? Why does he give himself that account? Unworthy to be called an apostle and unworthy to know the Lord and be an apostle?

Because he says, I persecuted the church. He had blood on his hands literally. And he could have seen himself as an unworthy sinner. So perhaps you are here today and you say, I'm not worthy of being forgiven.

You do not know what I've done. My plea to you is the same. I pray that you would meet the resurrected Christ today. So whether you're an unworthy sinner, an intellectual skeptic, or because of your proximity you've been blinded to Jesus, I pray that you would know him today.

Turning the unworthy sinners and the intellectual skeptics and those who have been in proximity to the Lord into forgiven ambassadors for Christ is what God has been doing for millennia.

[24 : 47] That's true of me. It may be true of you. So in conclusion, I want to give two words, a word to the church.

Paul in our text, he says, by the grace of God, I am what I am. And his grace towards me is not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, speaking of the other apostles, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is work in me.

In other words, Paul, what was on display in Paul's life was a manifestation not of Paul's capabilities or efforts, but the grace of God that was at work in him as he shared the gospel with others.

I worked harder, he says, than any of them. And he says, it is because of the grace of God, I am what I am. By grace, I have been saved, Paul would say.

So for us who believe, who have met the resurrected Christ, who have met Jesus, who have believed in him in his life, death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sin.

[25 : 58] For us today, the word of encouragement is proclaim Christ. He concludes whether than it is I or they, and so we preach. And so we preach.

What is the reality of the resurrected Christ have to do with those of us who believe we keep proclaiming Christ? It's of first importance.

It is all that is what we're basing our life after. So we proclaim him. And for those perhaps in this room who do not know him, and for those of us in this room who do know him, I want to conclude with an analogy.

And in order to do so, I want to share that I like Costco. I do. So I went to Costco this week, and so in fact some have even called me Costco man.

It comes with no superhero powers or anything. It's just I like Costco. But I went to Costco this week and as I exited the door, you show the person who's checking you out your receipt.

[27 : 13] And so you show your receipt and they write their little marker on it and then you get to exit. And what the person is doing is confirming what's in your basket that you, the cart that you put all your contents in and what's on your receipt match.

And so they, they let you go. But let's imagine for one moment that I didn't have a receipt and I just kept walking to my car. So I had my little cart of goods and I just walked out the door and I didn't show my receipt.

Now I have had no experience with this, but let me imagine what might happen if I were to do that. And I am sure that someone would stop me. They would sternly tell me to stop because the suspicion would be that I am stealing.

They would demand to see a receipt and without it, I have no proof of purchase and I am likely a thief. So this is, if you will, proof of purchase.

So, and what does it take? Let's think of for a moment. What does it take to get a receipt? First of all, you have to understand that a debt has been incurred. When I put an item on the shelf and into my cart, it is as if I have incurred a debt because I can't just walk out to my car with it without paying for it because that's not mine.

[28 : 27] I didn't pay for it. So I incur a form of debt when I put an item out of the off the shelf into my cart.

And let's think about the reality of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. What is it that we have incurred? We have incurred a debt.

The debt is the result of sin and the penalty of sin is death and the eternity separated from the Lord. And we, when we were born and born into sin, we are by virtue of that children of wrath.

And the penalty of sin is death, eternal separation. And someone perfect had to die to forgive sin. A debt was incurred as sinful humanity. What's also interesting about Costco is that they're a little bit particular. They will not accept payment in the form of monopoly money.

[29 : 29] You can't even bring like a herd of a hundred goats. They won't barter with you. So they won't take a hundred goats as compensation for the goods that are in your basket.

They won't even take foreign currency, Japanese yen. You can go up and they won't take it. They're a little particular about their form of payment. It's either cash or credit or debit that is in US dollars. That's what they're interested in. They only take US dollars. When we incurred a debt, what is the only form of payment that is accepted?

The blood of Jesus Christ. What is the debt that we incurred because of sinful humanity? We incurred a debt.

The debt, the only form of payment that is accepted is the blood of Jesus. He is the only accepted mediator between God and man.

[30 : 35] Jesus' death was the only form of payment for sin acceptable to God to avert his wrath towards sinners. And so Paul writes in Romans 4 25.

He says, he was delivered up for our trespasses. God's plan, God planned the death of Jesus in order to satisfy his wrath against sinners and demonstrate his love towards sinners.

And then once you incur a debt and the one form of payment is accepted, then you receive a receipt that indicates this is the proof of purchase.

After one form of payment is accepted, then you get a receipt. The resurrection serves as our receipt, proving that Jesus' death on the cross as payment for sin was paid in full and was sufficiently acceptable payment was paid for the sin to God.

Jesus was raised for our justification. Romans 4 25 goes on. He was raised, raised from the dead for our justification. That is, he was raised to declare us positionally righteous before God.

[32 : 01] In Jesus' death, we see our justification accomplished. It was finished and Jesus' resurrection. We see our justification accepted by God.

And so in Jesus' resurrection, we see that our justification has been accepted. He accepted the Jesus is atoning work on the cross. God's wrath has now been averted.

My sins have been paid in full. He is alive. I have the receipt. It's called the resurrection. And so when James and Paul or anyone else today understands and comes within the reality of the resurrected Christ, everything changes.

And that's why we celebrate. So the next time you and I go to a store and someone will ask you, would you like a receipt? I don't care whether you accept one or not, but I'm going to leave the store with my little receipt in hand and say, my sins are paid in full.

Would you say that with me? My sins have paid in full. Now you don't need to do that in practice. Someone might think you're odd. I might call the loony bin or something.

[33 : 14] But in my mind, I'm doing that. Would you like a receipt? In my mind, my sins are paid in full. Thank you.

So today to actualize the fact that your sins have been paid in full, you must believe in him. You must believe in Jesus Christ's sinless life, sinless life, his death for sin and his resurrection,

overcoming sin and death.

And that is the indication that your sins were paid in full and much more. Today, I would love for everyone to fill out a response card and you can place it in one of the black boxes out that line the exits as you leave today.

There are several boxes that you can check. If today for the very first time you say, Scott, I believe, I believe in Jesus as my savior, meaning that today for the very first time you have believed for the forgiveness of your sin and the person and the work of Jesus Christ in his sinless life, his death for sin and his resurrection.

Because I would like to visit with you about that. And if you have questions, maybe you're a skeptic like the Apostle Paul and you say, I would like some more information of how to begin a relationship. There's a box to indicate that.

[34 : 39] Thirdly, today perhaps you have been away from the Lord for some time and you want to recommit your life to the Lord. There's a place to indicate that. And you can also indicate I'm already a follower of Lord.

And if you would leave a prayer request and your information, we would like to communicate with you and have a way to encourage our walk with the Lord together.

He is risen. He is risen indeed. Let's pray. Father, we thank you.

When we acknowledge that we incurred a debt in our sinfulness and that the only one form of payment that was acceptable is your son's death, his body and blood given and shed for us, for all those who believe and that in your resurrection, it is, if you will, the proof of purchase.

And we can confidently say, my sins have been forgiven. My sins have been paid in full. So we thank you that today we have the opportunity to worship you.

[36 : 09] This is why, Lord, we sing songs to you. We want to honor you and glorify you and declare that we're just true about you.

Because we want to serve you with our life. You have purchased us, if you will. And we owe our very lives to you.

So may we live holy and pleasing lives to you. We thank you, Lord, for this day to worship you and celebrate what you have done.

We love you, Lord. Amen.