

The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus

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[0 : 0 0] We affirm our faith, but we also declare it in many ways that is, this is our anthem, this is the thing that we live by. And as such, the Apostles' Creed that is, as such, it is not the totality of the faith, but it certainly is the foundation of our faith.

And one of the reasons why we declare it, in a sense, is to keep me on my toes, so that if I say something that goes against what the creed says, then it's not the creed that is wrong, but it is me.

So if you hear something from me, you have a thousand percent permission, if it contravenes the creed that is, to come and talk to me about it, and to rake me over the coals if necessary.

Why don't we pray and ask the Lord's blessing before we open up his word. Father, we thank you for conversion.

Lord, for those that have put their faith and trust in your blessed Son. Lord, we have wonderful testimonies. Some dramatic, maybe some not so much, but wonderful testimonies nevertheless, about coming to faith and what that looks like.

[1 : 2 1] Lord, we thank you that you have gone to great lengths to convert us. That you have sought us out. That you have not commanded us to come up, but you have descended to us.

And Lord, we thank you for that. We thank you for the conversion of St. Paul that we'll read this morning. Lord, help us to glean from this story. To know what it truly means to follow after you and what it looks like to live a Christian life that is not perfect, but is reliant upon you, embedded in the church, learning to live for your glory.

And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen. If you don't have one of these scripture journals, they should be at the back. In fact, they are. There's a big stack. Grab one. It's our gift to you. And follow along.

In the scripture journal, we're going to be looking at Acts 9, verses 1 to 31. And that will be on page 52. Mossab Hassan Yusuf.

Does anybody know this name? Have you heard of this man? Mossab Hassan Yusuf is the son of one of the founders of Hamas.

[2 : 3 3] The same terrorist organization that you might have heard of in the summer and early fall, but you certainly know all about it now, since October 7th. He is significant, Mr. Yusuf, because in the 90s, he defected and became an Israeli spy, and then, more significantly, he came to faith in Christ and was baptized in the early 2000s.

Later, publicly proclaiming his faith, I think in 2007 or 2008, a bit later on in the 2000s. He is the most unlikely convert that I have heard of, at least in recent memory, in, say, the past hundred years.

It is a remarkable story. He was an enemy of Christ and a member of one of the most brutal and evil terrorist organizations in the world, maybe of all time. And Christ intervened in his life and changed him forever.

Mossab Hassan Yusuf. In our text today, we have another very significant and even more unlikely conversion, and even more, in a sense, in terms of salvation history, important conversion.

I'm not saying some conversions are more important than others, but in the kind of the grand narrative, it would be hard to find a conversion more significant than Saul of Tarsus coming to faith, later becoming St. Paul the Apostle.

[3 : 57] Saul's conversion is one of the most pivotal moments in the whole of Acts. In fact, in many ways, the story of Acts, it hinges on Paul's conversion.

I mean, you could argue that it actually hinges on the giving of the Holy Spirit, but in terms of the narrative, this is a key moment in Acts, so key that his conversion is mentioned three separate times, here in chapter 9, later on in chapter 22, and again in chapter 26.

And it really, truly is among the most famous conversions of all time, not simply because it is of Saul, later Paul, who would carry the gospel to the known world, to the Gentiles from Asia Minor all the way to Rome itself, but it is significant because it is miraculous and dramatic, and it becomes, in a sense, paradigmatic of what conversion is.

If you've been in church for a while, you can hear people talk about their own Damascus Road experience. That's describing Paul's conversion.

It becomes the paradigm. Or you could hear other people saying, you know, my conversion was kind of boring. I didn't have a Damascus Road experience. But either way, Paul's conversion becomes a very, very important conversion for which we understand how God saves and redeems.

[5 : 25] However, we must be careful to treat Saul's conversion as either the standard for all conversions, or as simply an exceptional circumstance, a one-off event that happened never to happen again.

In fact, we must instead take from it essential principles that are present in all conversions, be they dramatic or not.

And if you're a Christian, the majority of us will attest to probably not having a dramatic conversion. Maybe it's more a situation of just a slow realization, a gradual coming to faith.

But nevertheless, that does not mean it is any less significant or miraculous. The cause of all conversions is the grace of Christ.

And this is really the crux of the message this morning. The cause of all conversions is the grace of Christ by the Holy Spirit, through the will of the sovereign, all-powerful, all-knowing Father God.

[6 : 32] So Saul, I'm sure multiple times during the sermon, I'm going to call him Paul, but Saul, Paul, his conversion is instructive for us because the key components of all conversions are right there in chapter 9.

So to be converted, you must, first point, have an encounter with God. Now that looks different for all people, but you must have an encounter with God. And the second thing is, you must wrestle with and accept the truth of the gospel, the truth of God's word.

And the third is that you must live as a member and participate in the life of the church. So to be converted, a bit of a recap, to be converted, you must have an encounter with God, wrestle with and accept the truth of the gospel, and live as a member and participate in the life of the church.

So let's jump into it and look how Paul's encounter with Christ is instructive for us. Let's begin right in verse 1. We'll read verse 1 and 2. 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.

Up until now, Saul has been a murderous zealot. We haven't seen him for quite some time.

[8 : 03] The last time we saw him was in chapter 7 at the stoning of Stephen. And when we saw him for the first time when he was introduced, he was holding the garments of those that stoned Stephen and it said that he approved of what happened.

Saul comes back on the scene. And this is, by the way, following chapter 8 where the church scatters. Samaria essentially comes to faith and the Ethiopian eunuch comes to faith who is a high court official.

And Ethiopia goes down south and back to Ethiopia and history tells us that he brought the gospel to an entire nation. But now we're back to Saul. And he is still murderous.

He has a personal passion to hunt down Christians. He's passionate about this. In fact, he gets an open-ended extradition order from the high priest in Jerusalem.

And he pursues Christians all the way up to Damascus. Now, if he's in Jerusalem where he gets the extradition order from the high priest, Damascus is almost 250 kilometers away.

[9 : 08] It's days, maybe even weeks' journey. This isn't, what we see here isn't described, Saul isn't described as some rioter who is just caught up in the moment of murderous vengeance.

He is exacting. He is somebody who is planning his murder, planning the destruction of the church. This is his passion. This is his calling, so to speak.

He is a very murderous man. In fact, Peter here, or Peter Luke, the writer of Acts, he says that he is breathing threats and murder.

Literally, in the original language, Luke is trying to convey to us that Saul is like a rabid beast. He is a starving lion, and he is about to tear into the flesh of the church.

Later on in verse 21, the church is afraid of Saul, and they say that he caused havoc to the church. Again, language used to describe a ferocious beast who is laying waste to everything that's in front of it.

[10 : 17] That's Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee, the one with the green light to ravage the church. This is the last person that one would think and one would expect to come to faith.

But then Christ comes in. Then Jesus enters into the story. And look with me in verse 3. We'll read from verse 3 to 9. This, remember, Saul is almost at Damascus.

He is so cunning and exacting in his murderous intent. And then verse 3. Now, as he went on his way, that's Saul, 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 Saul said, who are you, Lord? Lord, by the way, would be an honorary title to somebody who clearly has authority.

This doesn't necessarily, well, clearly, it doesn't imply imply that Saul knows that it is Jesus or that he's assuming that it's Jesus. He's saying, who are you, Lord?

[11 : 27] Let's continue. 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. The men who were traveling with him, that is Saul, 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.

Saul was about to enter Damascus to carry out his heinous mission upon the church when the sovereign Lord Jesus Christ intervened in his life. Saul was ready to enter into Damascus as a ravaging, terrorizing lion.

And Christ intervenes and he has to be helped by the arm and he looks a lot more like a helpless lamb than a ravaging lion. This is what Christ has done with Saul.

He has intervened in his life. And it's very clear in the text that Saul did not choose Jesus but that Jesus chose Saul here.

[12 : 45] He broke into his life. Saul was an enemy of Christ, persecuting him by persecuting his church. It would be great if we spent a bit of time on what Jesus was meaning when he said you were persecuting me even though Saul was persecuting the church.

We'll get to that, I think, in the Sunday follow-up that I send out midweek. But clearly Saul is an enemy of Christ. He is persecuting his church.

Saul was not seeking Christ, friends. Christ was seeking Saul the same way that he sought out the Ethiopian eunuch in chapter 8. Jesus reveals himself to Saul so that he would never be the same.

This is the sovereign grace of God at work. This is how we encounter God when God encounters us. Christ is working salvation in Saul not in a collaborative way with Saul but despite Saul's best efforts to destroy Jesus.

It's remarkable that Jesus extends grace to his enemy. Consider Ephesians 2 written by the same Saul years later to the church in Ephesus and this is what he says verse 1 of Ephesians chapter 2 verse 2 in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind.

[14 : 25] Verse 4, But God, being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ, by grace you have been saved, and raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

Verse 8, For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast, for we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

It's very clear, the Apostle Paul, this is not of your own doing if you are saved. In fact, you are dead, you have no spiritual life in you. Dead people can't choose anything.

This is what is happening in Acts chapter 9, this is what Paul will testify about until he dies in Rome. This is the doctrine of election, and this is the doctrine, that God chooses to save us while we were far from him.

He awakens in us spiritual life when we were spiritually dead. He changes us, he shakes us up, he takes the hostile and makes some friends, he intervenes and changes our course, and he does this apart from our own working of, of working our way up to him, of choosing him, because we are incredibly about ourselves, and we do not want to give up the seat of kingship that we sit in, or we think we sit in, in the throne of our own souls.

[16 : 20] But the doctrine of election, that God saves who he wills, when he wills, can be a difficult thing for some. And I'll admit, it's in some ways very difficult for me, because it appears that God bypasses our ability to choose him, that somehow it makes little of our own agency as human beings.

And our agency as human beings, it's core to who we are. Ability to choose. It is core to what it means to be a human. But consider, that the sovereign grace of God does not trample on human personality or agency, but rather it enables us to be free from the bondage of pride, and of sin and prejudice.

In fact, it humbles us, so that we can see clearly, without the fog and cloud, and film of selfish ambition, and a misguided worldview, of confusion.

Saul does not encounter Christ only to become some kind of automaton. It doesn't say that he just went about his business, Christ's business afterwards, without any personality drained of who he is.

That's not the case at all. Instead, he was struck with the reality that Christ is real, and that his truth is the only real truth.

[17 : 43] And we'll see in this next section, where Saul wrestles and accepts the truth, that the sovereign grace of God requires a proper response of those that hear the gospel, and ultimately have to respond to it.

And this brings us to the second point, that a key aspect of salvation is that we have to wrestle with, and ultimately accept the gospel message. And again, that looks different for each person.

That can be a longer process, a shorter process, but it has to be there. It has to be there. Saul is blinded. And here, in the same way that Zechariah, if you remember, in the opening chapters of Luke, John the Baptist's father, where he can't talk anymore, it is a physical representation of what is happening in his soul, in his spirit.

Saul is blinded as a reflection of his spiritual condition. But it is also, in a sense, the grace of God in his life, for what we see is going to happen next.

Look with me, verses 8 and 9. 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.

[19 : 03] And for three days, he was without sight and neither ate nor drank. Saul, again, who was to enter Damascus, strong and powerful, to take captive the church, was now a captive of Christ, being helped into Damascus.

Things couldn't be any more different. He is blind. It says that, and for three days, he was without sight and neither ate nor drank. Nowhere yet do we see Saul confess the faith.

Nowhere yet has he been baptized. Has he joined a church? Maybe he's a Christian. Maybe he's not. The text doesn't say. But clearly, in his life, as of verse 9, he does not have the markings of a Christian.

He has not confessed his faith. He has not been baptized. He has not confessed his faith. Conversion, friends, is often gradual. And it's gradual because, again, we are not drained of who we are and our experiences and our thoughts and our ability to think and be rational.

But we, when we encounter God, are confronted with things that come up against our existing worldview. And we have to ask the question, okay, I've encountered God, at least I think I have, I feel like this gnawing in my head, maybe it's my heart, I don't know, do I have a soul?

[20 : 32] But it seems completely counter to everything I've believed my entire life. What my friends believe. My friends are good people but they're not Christians. Does this mean I have to lose my friends or push them away or start dressing a certain way or stop doing a certain thing?

And all of a sudden we have this inner dialogue, this wrestling, this turmoil, in a sense, of the implications of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

And that can be a wrestling that can go on for months and maybe years. God in his sovereignty will determine how long that takes for each person.

That's why we as a congregation ought to be patient because Christ is patient. Some of you may have gone through a series of wrestlings before you've come to faith and then have gone through a series of wrestlings after.

And you can attest to the patience of Christ in your life. So too, church, we must be patient with people. But anyways, back to the text. This is what seems to be happening with Paul.

[21 : 39] I mean, it's speculation. I'm maybe reading in between the lines here but based on what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11 and Philippians 3 and Romans 7 of his previous life, it would seem to me that Paul has nothing going on for three days.

He's blind. He's completely dumbfounded. He's neither eating nor drinking. He's weak. Could it be that he is wrestling with God in this time?

He's encountered Christ. Remember, he was a top-notch, next-level religious zealot entrusted with the purity of his sect of Judaism.

Could some of these words be going on in Saul of Tarsus' head during these three days where he was blind, neither eating nor drinking?

Jesus couldn't be the Messiah, could he? He was killed as a criminal and hung on a tree. The Torah tells us that those that hang from a tree are cursed by God and the Messiah can't be cursed by God.

[22 : 46] But then, a cursed man can't be risen from the grave. That seems that God himself is vindicating Jesus, but how can God vindicate somebody who's cursed and evil?

And if his teachings, and if he is vindicated, that means his teachings and his life must be correct, but his teachings go against what I believe and what I've trusted in.

Does that mean I have to give up everything that I've believed in and I've studied for my entire life since I was a child? And if that's the case, do I lose my community? Do I lose my standing in the synagogue in Jerusalem?

You start to see that this wrestling could very well be taking place with Saul. And this is going before his conversion. And he is seeking answers and he is wrestling and his world is coming up against the worldview of the Messiah.

And he's not sure what to do or maybe he is sure but there's doubt and there's struggles sovereign grace of Christ, it confronts us and it grips us.

[23 : 53] That's when we know we've encountered God. That when we encounter God and we'll see in the life of Saul here, in many ways life doesn't get better, it can get more difficult and more messy.

The things that we've enjoyed, the privileges that we've had, we have to give up potentially. And these are things that we need to count the cost of as we come to faith and as we continue on in the life of faith but especially as we come to faith.

The sovereign grace of Christ confronts and grips us and we are left to respond to him how? By wrestling through the implications and ultimately by accepting the truth.

And that truth, that journey of wrestling leading us to a decision, that also has the grace of God marbled through it so that God is there every step of the conversion process.

It is a gift from him. So on one hand, we are saved by grace alone through faith alone and yet, our own wrestlings and responses are necessary. And you see all of a sudden that on one hand, we choose God but on the other hand, we do not choose God.

[25 : 10] He saves us and yet, he does all that but we have to respond to him and it's a really remarkable back and forth. Ultimately, God saves.

We don't have a part in our salvation but we certainly have to respond to him. I'll read from you just a small bit of C.S. Lewis' own conversion.

This is from Surprised by Hope. This is from his autobiography and this is how he describes this encounter with God but then also his choosing God and this is what he says.

I became aware that I was holding something at bay or shutting something out or, if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing like corsets or even a suit of armor as if I were a lobster.

I felt myself being there and then given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut. I could unbuckle the armor or keep it on. Neither choice was presented as a duty.

[26 : 12] No threat or promise was attached to either though I knew that to open the door or to take off the corset meant the incalculable. The choice appeared to be momentous but it was also strangely unemotional.

I was moved by no desires or fears. In a sense I was not moved by anything. I chose to open, to unbuckle, to loosen the rein. I say I chose yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite.

On the other hand I was aware of no motives. You could argue that I was not a free agent but I am more inclined to think this came near to me or sorry this came near to being a perfectly free act than most I have ever done.

Necessity may not be the opposite of freedom and perhaps a man is most free when instead of producing motives he could only say I am what I do. For those who may still be wrestling with the truth of the gospel as it confronts your world view rest assured that God is patient and gentle in the process but that he certainly will complete the work that he begins that he will be faithful to you and patient in the process.

So we as Christians like I mentioned we ought to be also patient with those around us with our family members and friends and other parishioners.

[27 : 43] If we continue we see that the wrestling and struggle of coming to faith is not something we are left to go through by ourselves because God sent to Saul this man named Ananias.

Look with me verses 10 to 16. 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 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight but Ananias answered Lord I have heard from many about this man how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name but the Lord said to Ananias go for he 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 if you remember the first Ananias was not a faithful follower in fact he might not have been a follower at all he was faithless and an enemy of the gospel now this new

Ananias that we see in chapter 9 he is faithful he is used by God in Saul's life in a remarkable way confirming God's call on his life despite Ananias apprehension he obeys the Lord and look at verse 17 and just before we read it consider the turmoil that Paul has gone through potentially has gone through if we go through you know my speculative reading of Saul for sure he's weak he's been in prayer it just says that he feels alone because he's a human and we would all feel alone and then Ananias shows up verse 17 let's read so Ananias departed and entered the house and laying his hands on him he said 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 so imagine being called a brother and having hands laid on you feeling like your world has been turned upside down and the implications might be more than you can bear and then God sends a man to comfort you and to welcome you into a family you feel the faithfulness of Christ in that moment to Saul the kindness of God in that moment to be called brother by the very man that you would have likely saw killed just three days before this is grace this is the sovereign grace of God at work this is what it means to be called into the church of Christ is to know a love and kindness that is so foreign in our world not because the world is rougher now than it was 50 years ago because the world is rough and that is what is happening here imagine if this was the way we lived our lives as a church in the midst of a culture of cancellation and polarization of demonizing those who are different than you people come to faith and we welcome them to your brother to your sister somebody who has not enjoyed the embrace of somebody that truly loves them for years potentially decades are embraced with

Christian love it's a very powerful thing friends you may have a small or large part in someone's faith journey but be ready because you will some plant some water but it is Christ who brings the growth surely but some plant and some water when an opportunity presents itself to you will you be obedient will you be an ananias that person might look like a threat or somebody who is terribly uncomfortable and awkward or somebody that you just you don't want to go near because you are a hyper introvert and you like your space will you be obedient will you offer a hand of family and fellowship to that person if the Lord is calling you to that Saul is given assurance by his sight being restored and he comes to accept the truth that

[32 : 38] Jesus is indeed the Christ verse 18 it says this and immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained sight he arose and was baptized and taking food he was strengthened Saul has come to faith he has encountered God he has wrestled with God he has ultimately accepted the gospel message and friends this is a Christian man who just three days before sought to kill Christians immediately Saul is welcomed into the church and participates in the life of the church and this is a key reality of coming to faith and this will help us to transition into our third and final aspect of what it means to be a converted person is that we are to live as members and participate in the life of the church when we come to faith you are incorporated into the very body of Christ and with it you get to participate in the life and mission of the church so look with me at verse 20 and immediately and immediately sorry and immediately he proclaimed that is Saul

Jesus in the synagogue saying he is the son of God and all who heard him were amazed and said is this not 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 but Saul increased all the more in strength and confounded the Jews that is the unbelieving Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ when many days had passed the unbelieving Jews plotted to kill him but their plot became known to Saul they were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall lowering him in a basket Saul the ravager of the church becomes the proclaimer of the gospel the raging lion has become the bleeding lamb the bleeding of this lamb is the proclamation of the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world so when

Paul when Luke tells us that he proclaims that Jesus is the son of God that's a bit of a catch-all term for Saul later Paul's theology that Jesus is indeed the sent one the Messiah God's only son that is going to die for the sins of the world Paul is participating in the mission of the church friends at the very heart of the church is the mission to continue the same ministry of Jesus Christ himself proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand that they that all people should repent and believe and be baptized Jesus is the only one by which anyone can be saved it's the only name that brings salvation under heaven this is the message of Christ and it becomes our message to proclaim as well we are called to both live out and proclaim this gospel and evangelism right it can be difficult and daunting because we live in Canada and

Canada is very much a live and let live society our history was forged not on the battlefields of Gettysburg but on the on the on the boardroom of Charlottetown so to speak we we negotiate we find nuance we we tolerate it's in the very DNA in a sense of what it means to be Canadians interesting we'll see in 30 40 50 years what Canada will look like if that will still be our DNA as more and more people come from around the world into Canada but nevertheless we are a live and let live society by and large on the ground so confrontation is not something that comes easy for us and evangelism seems very confrontational because as we share the faith and we're not necessarily attacking people but it can be perceived as that and it is difficult but this is the reality of the kingdom that when the gospel is proclaimed it comes against our existing worldview and it causes us to make a choice it confronts us and when heaven confronts an unredeemed people and culture of any culture but of

Canada persecution is bound to come not necessarily from Jerusalem and the chief priests to bound us up and take us away to be arrested and stoned but in all sorts of ways where our reputation could take a hit and decisions that we make will result in a less comfortable less live and let live kind of life but the strength that God gives as we bear witness to him is a strength that we need to accomplish this goal and this is what we are called to do so that God calls us into the church gives us a mission knows our frailty gives us the strength to do it to be encouraged by one another so not all of us are called to have an evangelism ministry of St. Paul thank God in many ways Paul is going to live a crazy difficult hard life but we are called to follow our Savior and to proclaim his name let us continue in verse 26 and when he had come to Jerusalem that is Saul just pause really quickly here and this is something we'll deal with later on the time markers aren't like Paul was in

[38 : 33] Damascus for a week or two good possibility that he was there for a year or two and in here somewhere there's a trip to Arabia that he'll talk about later on we're not going to deal with that but anyway some time has passed he comes to Jerusalem let's pick it up in verse 26 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 so he went in and out among them at Jerusalem and what's implied in between verse 27 and 28 is that they've accepted him the church in Jerusalem so Paul went in and out among them at Jerusalem preaching boldly in the name of the Lord and he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists the the Greek speaking Jewish people but they were seeking to kill him and when the brothers learned this they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus his hometown our church will see people come to faith it's true it will and those converts will almost certainly include people that will be ethnically and culturally and socially and economically different than many of us and we have the privilege but we also have the orders from Christ himself to welcome all new Christians into the church without exception and welcome them as brothers and sisters that we must extend hospitality and love in the same way that Ananias extended it to Saul in

Damascus and Barnabas did so to Saul in Jerusalem it makes sense that they were afraid of Saul he came and he showed up maybe this was the the the result of an extended plot and Saul was he's like a fifth columnist inside the Jerusalem church they didn't know they're maybe potentially wise to be careful but Barnabas comes in and he advocates he does in a sense the work of the Holy Spirit advocating for Saul and that is our call too so when we see people that will be different than us we are compelled to welcome them in that means in all likelihood we will see people come to faith and join our church that come from the LGBT community we might see people that have previously lived a trans life or have been in a same-sex relationship and they come to faith and who knows where they are in the process of submitting their lives to Christ our job primarily first and foremost is to love them and welcome them and to be to them brothers and sisters in Christ and as they are growing in their faith and wrestling through sin in their lives we are there to be strength for them because later on they will be strength for us when we are wrestling through things we do not have the option of shunning people if they do not fit in our nice neat categories after people come to faith and before they come to faith we show them love and kindness compelling them to submit their lives to Christ and this is why in a very real way the church the church is the true diversity equity inclusion originators because what unites us isn't who we are or what we have done or what we will do or how much money we have or because we need to reach a specific quota or look a certain way but it's because of Christ Christ who saves all without partiality he looks at people and chooses them not because of what they have done but because of his great love extended to them and welcomes them in so that the church truly is diverse united though around Christ bigotry prejudice haughtiness of any kind has no place in our church and sometimes it takes a Barnabas to remind us of that it is fitting then as Paul says in Galatians chapter 3 starting verse 25 but now that faith has come we are no longer under a guardian for in

Christ Jesus you are all sons of God and when he says sons of God he is talking in a sense of firstborn it's not just that it's sons and daughters it's or just regular sons it's that we are firstborn sons with all the privileges that that entails in the ancient world firstborn sons men and women all firstborn sons in Christ Jesus for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek slave or free male or female for you are all one in Christ Jesus and if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring heirs according to promise that is the calling of all of us in the church firstborn sons with all the benefits and privileges that accompany that reality do you see the grace of God at work here in Acts chapter 9 where Saul who we last saw as approving the stoning of Stephen has become a Stephen himself fleeing Jerusalem the sovereign grace of

God has gripped him so that he has encountered Christ wrestled with him and accepted the truth and has been welcomed in as a full member of the church participating in its life and mission and he suffers not as a punishment of his previous crimes but as a privilege of being united to Christ and being associated with his name friends this is conversion this is the gospel message this is our reality and if it's a struggle this morning good keep struggling keep wrestling there's there's lots of room for that this is a reality friends of all conversions whether or not your conversion was like Paul's or coming to faith as a teen and later kind of confirming your faith later on or maybe it's that you've never not known a time where you haven't been saved and just God's kindness and grace is all you've known from your entire life and you've kind of grown in that maturity whatever it is the principles are the same God's sovereign grace has been active in your life this is the reality for which Jesus

Christ died on the cross being buried and rising again this is grace it is life it is truth it is the way of salvation let's let us pray father we thank you for the example in life of St. Paul or we thank you that there's no mistaking that you intervened in his life and that you showed up in a miraculous way so that he encountered you that he wrestled with the implications of what it meant to become a Christian and ultimately came to faith accepting and proclaiming your name being baptized being welcomed into the church Lord may that reality be our reality may that reality be the reality of our neighbors and friends and our children our co-workers those we meet as we go about our lives in this part of Ottawa Lord we pray that this would be so clear and evident that you and you alone bring people to faith Lord we ask that you would help us to be real about our ongoing wrestlings our ongoing struggles and Lord help us to remember that you are patient with us and help us to remember to be patient with each other and Lord we pray that the the the goodness of your grace would abound in our congregation all the more we pray this in Christ's name amen if you have children now is the time to pick them up to pick them up to sign them out of Messiah kids