



***Theme: Power Made Perfect in Weakness – The Life of Paul
“Humans and Angels”***

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber, November 1-2, 2025, at Summit Church, Durango

VIDEO **Sermon Starter**

SLIDE **“Humans and Angels”**

My daughter's boyfriend began working at the Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory production center this past week and unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, he brings home these boxes of imperfect chocolates that can't be sold at the store. I find it fascinating that the chocolate seems to look OK to me but there are small blemishes, and they certainly don't taste bad. I was sharing this with a group of pastor friends this week on a Zoom call, and we laughed that it probably was a good sermon illustration. I went with how tempting these are and sometimes it feels like Satan has entered our house in the form of these innocent boxes. One of my colleagues took a different route and talked about how inside of every imperfection there is something that can be sweet and beautiful. What is amazing is that we find both ideas in the life of the apostle Paul.

GRAPHIC **Chocolate box**

Today, we embark on a new series of sermons looking at the life of

the apostle Paul and how that life impacts ours. It's especially fitting to begin this series on All Saints weekend because more than any other person than Jesus, Paul is the reason that we are here today in worship. For the next few weeks, we will take you to different places where the apostle Paul started churches and give us a feel for what it would have been like for those early followers of Jesus in a foreign land of Greece and modern-day Turkey.

We also will have our baptism and confirmation services this month and I have water from the well and the stream where the first baptism of Lydia took place in Greece in the city of Philippi. We will talk about the opposition to Paul's ministry and his suffering and death. Today we are going to focus on his early life and his conversion and how we see his weaknesses be used by God, much like God can use our weaknesses.

There is no human being aside from Jesus and his parents Mary and Joseph who have had a greater impact on the Christian faith than the apostle Paul. He was the principal thinker in the early church who helped people understand what it meant to follow Jesus. Paul is the one who heard the call from Christ to take the gospel from a small and little-known sect in Judaism in Jerusalem out to the Greco-Roman world where it then could penetrate the rest of the globe. He starts churches in cities throughout Greece and Turkey which then could move into Europe and Asia minor, eventually crossing the Mediterranean Sea into Africa. It is Paul who helped Christianity become the faith tradition it is today which connects with 31% of the world's population.

About half of your New Testament, 13 of the 27 books, are written by Paul in the form of letters that were written to those early churches, or to the leaders of those churches. His words have been translated and read by more people throughout the world than any other author. They not only have changed western civilization, but they have transformed billions of lives over the last two centuries. Paul's letters are the earliest Christian documents we have and so they shaped the early church and those communities who eventually developed the gospels and the

stories of Jesus.

Paul tells us who he is in his writings and in the book of Acts which is written by Luke who also wrote the gospel with his name on it. We find much of Paul's life described by Luke and in these 3 verses from Acts 22:3-4 and Philippians 3:5.

BIBLE

³ Then Paul said, “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, and I was brought up and educated here in Jerusalem under Gamaliel. As his student, I was carefully trained in our Jewish laws and customs. I became very zealous to honor God in everything I did, just like all of you today. ⁴ And I persecuted the followers of the Way, hounding some to death, arresting both men and women and throwing them in prison.

BIBLE

⁵ I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law.

GRAPHIC Countries that Border the Mediterranean

This map shows you the modern countries which border the Mediterranean Sea so we can get our bearings. Turkey was called galatia during the time of Paul and we can see that here on this next map as we zoom in a bit.

GRAPHIC Geography Map at time of Paul

As we zoom in, we see again Rome at the top left and then Greece in the top middle and then Turkey at the top right. You can see tarsus which is the city where Paul grew up on the right middle of this map and the Holy Land just below that.

GRAPHIC Tarsus of Cilicia Map

Zooming in a bit more we find the city of tarsus with the mountain range up above it about 10 miles away and then the Mediterranean Sea below another 10 miles away. The red lines represent the road system built by the Romans which would take you from this region either S towards Jerusalem and then on to Egypt and Africa, or north to Asia, or West to Greece and Turkey. This was a major trade route, and it was a major city where Paul would have met people from all over the world growing up.

GRAPHIC Ancient Cilician Gates

GRAPHIC South Cilician Gate Today

GRAPHIC Cilician Gates Ariel View Today

I've shared with you before that one of the reasons this area was so important is because it connected Africa to Asia and Europe. There were gates built by the Romans through the mountains and here is one of the ancient gates depicted in this drawing. We can see the ruins of one of the gates in the South end on this next slide, and finally an aerial view of what it looked like today. You can see why it was so important to have a way through these mountains to connect you to the other parts of civilization in the ancient near east. This is how you would get to Rome and the rest of the civilized world.

Tarsus was a free city and had a lower tax rate than most of the other cities around. About 200,000 people lived in this city and it was a hub for Greek learning, philosophy, and theater. This was one of the top five cities in the Roman Empire with a modest sized Jewish community. He grows up knowing the gentile world and understands how non-Jews think. He grows up learning Greek as a primary language alongside Hebrew which enabled him to write letters in Greek. This allows him to preach in every city in the Roman world and communicate in a language that everyone could understand. Only 10% of the entire Roman world were citizens but because his parents were then he also inherited that birthright which gave him it's that many people didn't have during his

time. This came with benefits and respect and protections that others didn't receive.

We know that Paul was a tent maker so most likely his parent's made tents for a living which was a large industry in this port city which then would ship tents all over the world. This gives him a way to earn a living when he is preaching the gospel later in life. If you were to go to Tarsus today, you could find some of these ancient Roman ruins. We see an ancient Roman road as well as a well where many people come to remember the Apostle Paul.

GRAPHIC Ancient Roman Road in Tarsus

GRAPHIC Tarsus Ancient Well

What we believe is that at the age of 13 Paul goes to a boarding school in Jerusalem. At the age of 13 a Jewish boy would become a man. Today they would have a bar mitzvah ceremony for a boy or a bat mitzvah ceremony for a girl. In the day of Paul, you would go to a special school, or you would begin a trade as an apprentice. Paul is going to study under one of the leading rabbis of his day, Gamaliel. He was part of the Jewish ruling council, and he was the grandson of Hillel the Elder who was one of the greatest rabbis and Jewish leaders of all times. Going to this school would be like going to an Ivy League school or Oxford in England. He would spend 6 years there typically which is what it would take to do college and Graduate School. He would become an expert in the law by listening and studying the law and eventually becoming an apprentice and teaching. Paul describes it this way in Acts 22.

BIBLE

³ Then Paul said, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, and I was brought up and educated here in Jerusalem under Gamaliel. As his student, I was carefully trained in our Jewish laws and customs. I became very zealous to honor God in everything I did, just like all of you today.

In the 2nd century, in the one hundreds, there was a document written called the *Acts Paul and Thecla*. At Ephesus there is a hidden cave sometimes called “The Grotto of Paul.” It is located away from the normal visitors’ routes through Ephesus. It overlooks the site of ancient Ephesus from the south.

GRAPHIC Paul and Thecla

On the western wall of the grotto a painting portrays an event from the apocryphal book. The painting is from the 5th or 6th century A.D. and depicts the initial event described in the book, in the city of Iconium, where Thecla is looking from a window at Paul preaching while Thecla’s mother looks on. The story goes that Thecla, against the wishes of her mother and her finance, gave up her engagement to remain a virgin and to follow Paul.

Eventually, Thecla was separated from Paul and became a significant preacher and witness to her faith. In addition, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* contains the earliest physical description of Paul:

“And he [Onesiphorus] saw Paul coming [towards Iconium], a man small in size, bald-headed, bandy-legged, well-built, with eyebrows meeting, rather long-nosed, full of grace.”

While this book was not written by any of the apostles and is not considered scripture by any means, many scholars believe this description might be accurate mostly because it doesn't describe him as flattering or ruggedly handsome, but plain and simple.

GRAPHIC Paul described in Acts of Paul and Thecla

I love this description of Paul because it reminds me of this box of chocolate. We see Paul's full humanity on display in his life and in his writings and they are not perfect as we see how he brutalized people in his younger years. At other times we see Paul filled with the Holy Spirit, something like an angel, which I remind you is a messenger sent from God and not necessarily something with wings in the scriptures. This

Chocolate may have imperfections, but it's still tastes amazing. One of the beautiful things about Paul is that we see his imperfections and his humanity, and we see the Holy Spirit working in and through him that made him a Saint And whom without none of us would be here as followers of Jesus.

One of the reasons I find our scriptures authentic is because they often tell us the imperfections of the people in them. This is true of the apostle Paul as he describes his own weaknesses which is a rare act of humility when you think about it. Most of us aren't willing to talk about our imperfections and in today's world the focus seems to be on only things which are amazing which is why social media and so much of our communication in today's world is not very helpful because it's not very real. Not many of us post our failings on Facebook or Instagram or Snapchat or YouTube. Most of us want to hide the negative reviews, but Paul puts it right there in his letter 2 Corinthians 10.

BIBLE

¹⁰ For some say, “Paul’s letters are demanding and forceful, but in person he is weak, and his speeches are worthless!”

It takes a lot of courage to name what people say about us, which is not positive, but people were drawn to the apostle Paul because he was honest and because he had a message of truth, hope and grace to share that flew in the face of what the rest of the world was saying. It was his courage and ability to reason that drew people to him. In the face of suffering, he remained faithful to the message of the gospel. Paul would never have been on a most eligible bachelor show or a top 100 list of sexiest men alive. He was on the list of people who were driven to serve God and to do so with conviction.

As we read Paul's writings, we recognize that some of them are difficult to understand and we wonder if what we are reading is what he meant to say. We aren't the only ones who struggle with this as we read in 2 Peter 3, written we believe by the apostle Peter, these words at the

end of his letter.

BIBLE

¹⁵ And remember, our Lord's patience gives people time to be saved. This is what our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom God gave him— ¹⁶ speaking of these things in all of his letters. Some of his comments are hard to understand, and those who are ignorant and unstable have twisted his letters to mean something quite different, just as they do with other parts of Scripture. And this will result in their destruction.

I find this fascinating because there are things that are difficult to understand in Paul's writings, especially as we try to connect them to today's world. I took Bible courses in college. I have a master's in theology. I worked on a Doctor of Ministry, and I have tried to learn Hebrew and Greek. I feel like I know just enough to get me in lots of trouble when it comes to trying to figure out the scriptures. Which are filled with questionable grammar. Yes, we believe the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write these words, but even Peter in his letter acknowledged that these things are hard to understand. Much of what we read we can't understand and we discover there is beauty as the Holy Spirit works through these words.

Some of the things that he writes divide churches to this present day, even as they did 2000 years ago. Churches were divided about slavery because of the words of Paul and how they were interpreted. Churches have been divided about the role of alcohol because of the words of Paul in scripture. My grandparents used to hide in the basement and play bridge by candlelight and dance because it was forbidden by the church at one point because of the writings of Paul.

There have been arguments over the role of leaders and unjust leaders because of the writings of Paul. Did Paul really mean that we should submit to every earthly authority, even when they are going to put us to death which is what would happen if for Paul? Evangelical and

Baptist churches are being divided right now about the role of women in ministry because of what Paul says. Mainline churches are dividing around human sexuality and what God's will is for this area of our lives. Did Paul mean to write these letters to cause division in the church even when the last the prayer of Jesus was that we would be One?

Yes, there are places where we wrestle with Paul and how we interpret those words, but most of his letters help us see the beauty of the will of God and the beauty of the gospel. We see an Angel who is a messenger that brings us closer to the presence of God through his words. We find Paul's full humanity on display, and we find God speaking through him as a messenger, the voice of an Angel.

SLIDE This is our story.

This is where Paul's life connects with our lives. We are both human and divine according to the scriptures. We make mistakes and we fall short and we are made in the image of God. We are fully human, and we cause harm in the world that we call sin, which is what separates us from God and from each other and from ourselves. And we are angels, messengers from God who are called to do God's work in the world and be the answer to people's prayers. Paul wrote about it this way in his letter to the Romans, chapter 7.

BIBLE

¹⁹ I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. ²⁰ But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

He then writes in the next chapter these words in Romans 8.

BIBLE

¹¹ The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.

This is our story. We are both imperfect and we are beautiful and made in the image of God. God made you to love you and you have moments of selfishness and brokenness. We saw this on display this past week in our own community. We see the brokenness of our humanity in an imperfect immigration system which often causes harm. We all know something different needs to be done but none of us can quite figure out how to do it. This Is Us. This is our story. We know we are called to do good and to be better but sometimes we don't know how to do it, and we perpetuate harm. This happens in our personal lives, and it happens in our political process right now as people are going hungry and families are being torn apart.

The reason I find Paul's story so compelling is because He is doing horrible things that he believes is what God wants him to do and in the middle of that he has an experience of Jesus. We find his story beginning in Acts chapter 7. If you have your bibles, you may want to open to that section of scripture, and you will get a chance to read that this week with the meditation moments. We find Steven who is one of the early Christians about to be martyred for his faith. He has been arrested, and the religious leaders are unhappy with his preaching and teaching that they feel is blasphemy. The early Christians were not called by that name but instead we're called "followers of the Way." Stephen was one of the leaders and they preached that Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed one sent by God, and that he died and on the third day he rose again. This was embarrassing to some of those religious leaders who had Jesus put to death.

Stephen is arrested as a Deacon in the church and gives his testimony before the religious leadership. After his testimony the court decides that he must die. The religious leader who gave approval for Steven's stoning was a man named Saul. His Roman name was Paul. The people lay their coats at the feet of Saul and then they stoned Stephen to death. That happens at the end of Chapter 7 and at the beginning of chapter 8 we read these words.

BIBLE

1 Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen. A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria. ² (Some devout men came and buried Stephen with great mourning.) ³ But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison.

Paul was arresting those followers of Jesus to silence them. I think he also was blinded by his own ambition. He's in his early 20s and Jesus has risen from the grave in the last year as this movement begins to take hold of Jerusalem. Paul has just graduated from seminary, and he is trying to make a name for himself. He's going to volunteer for a job that no one else wants but that will bring him fame and notoriety and power and prestige in the eyes of the religious leaders. He's going to solve their problem and take their authority and use it to bludgeon people into submission. His own ambition took a hold of his heart to lead a movement to put down the followers of Jesus.

SLIDE Our own blind ambition.

Paul's story is a cautionary tale to those of us who are blinded by our own ambition at times. It's especially important to be aware of how our ambition gets a hold of us when we think it's God's will to do this thing that we feel we are called to do. That's what Paul thought. He believed God wanted him to kill people and put them in prison for their faith. We easily can compromise our own values and the end can justify the means when our ambition blinds us. What part of taking away Jewish men and women and putting them into prison looks like loving your neighbor as you love yourself? Remember that those are words that Paul would have learned as a young boy. Paul was so focused on his own conviction that he was right and his own ambition That he turned people

into objects and no longer saw people's humanity.

Sometimes we can believe something is so true and have so much conviction that we don't take the time to humbly ask if this is what really, we should be doing. When we combine our personal convictions with our sin nature and our ambition, we can end up doing terrible things that are totally opposite of what our faith teaches us. We see that in Paul's story and we can see that in our story. Paul writes about this danger himself when he talks about his own story in Galatians 1 (Common English Bible.)

BIBLE

¹³ You heard about my previous life in Judaism, how severely I harassed God's church and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my peers, because I was much more militant about the traditions of my ancestors. (CEB)

His passion about his convictions of his traditions moved him to inflict pain and violence on others which he justified because it was commissioned to him by God. Paul is always willing to describe clearly who he used to be in both his letters and when we read the book of Acts. He never hides his past life but he's honest about the places where he fell short and where he caused harm. We read this in Acts 26 (Common English Bible) as he is describing who he was to King Herod Agrippa when he was a prisoner in Jerusalem later in his life.

BIBLE

⁹ "I really thought that I ought to oppose the name of Jesus the Nazarene in every way possible. ¹⁰ And that's exactly what I did in Jerusalem. I locked up many of God's holy people in prison under the authority of the chief priests. When they were condemned to death, I voted against them. ¹¹ In one synagogue after another—indeed, in all the synagogues—I would often torture them, compelling them to slander God. My rage bordered on the hysterical as I pursued them, even to foreign cities. (CEB)

Paul is trained in the Hebrew law and wants to be a rabbi or teacher our leader of the Jewish ruling council someday. Yet, he got it so wrong. Even if Jesus wasn't Messiah, Paul got it wrong because he was blinded by ambition and conviction that was misplaced. He was blinded by his own anger. I was thinking about the different times I have seen young people in their 20s doing horrible things in the name of God. I think of those whose actions began the bloody conflict in Gaza and Israel who rode their motorcycles into towns and villages killing innocent children and women. I think of the response that was done by soldiers in their 20s believing that what they were doing was wanted by God. I read this week about executions and genocide beginning to happen again in Darfur as young people committed atrocities in the name of their God.

Even if you consider someone your enemy, doing the things they did pointed to something evil and broken which took over in their hearts. They were darkened by sin and brokenness in a way that leads them to do horrific acts of violence and murder. I remember reading text messages that were sent from young Hamas soldiers and young Israeli soldiers they sent to their parents asking them to be proud for the people they killed with their bare hands. It seemed like the messages pointed to them as soldiers beginning to regret their actions and hoping their parents would at least be proud and maybe they could reaffirm them that what they were doing was OK. They would say "God is the greatest" as they slaughtered families or took hostages.

What I'm always struck by is that these extremists never represent the populations they come from. But I know is the brokenness and the ambition and the conviction that comes without thought or a check by the Holy Spirit causes tremendous damage. Rage and sin and darkness can get a hold of the best of us and it begins sometimes if we're honest with some of the dialogue we throw around on social media or in other places without thinking about the consequences. We get used to saying things online that we would never say to someone's face and it ratchets everything up.

GRAPHIC Cain and Abel

This is the history of humankind where we see many moments in history littered with the dark impulse when we think we are right and when we turn people into objects so that we can destroy them. When ambition and conviction and sin become intertwined it can lead to rage and hate and horrible actions. It starts in Genesis 4 when Cain takes his brother Abel into the field. There's a reason this is one of the first stories in the Bible. Cain is jealous of his brother and feels like God is favoring Abel and so he bashes his brother's head with a rock.

How does that happen? By the time we get to Genesis 6 God is grieving that he ever made humanity because they are perpetually violent all the time to one another. This has been the story of our lives as a species and so we see that it's not just groups that we read about in today's news that have committed atrocities over the course of human history. I think of the Nazis in World War One and World War 2 who had the audacity to put, "God is with us," on their belt buckles.

GRAPHIC WW II German GOTT MIT UNS Belt Buckle

The ultimate irony is that in Hebrew this is, "Emmanuel." I think of the KKK who spread bigotry, lynched people, and left burning crosses as they were on their way to church on Sunday morning. During the week they would cloak themselves in bed sheets and wear crosses around their necks saying that what they were doing was because of God and the conviction given to them.

GRAPHIC All Saints Castle Church in Wittenberg Germany

This weekend is All Saints weekend with Halloween being on Friday. Martin Luther launched the Reformation by posting his 95 theses on the door of what today is called the All-Saints Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. He didn't mean to launch the Protestant Reformation, and he was considered a saint by many until people began to read the rest of his story. God used Martin Luther in powerful ways and at the same time he had serious issues. Towards the end of his life

in 1546 he wrote a tract, ***“On the Jews and Their Lies.”*** He Was offended they hadn't been converted by his message and so he gives the leaders in his region this **“sincere”** advice:

“First, set fire to their synagogues and schools. Bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn so that no one will ever see a stone or cinder of it. This is to be done in honor of our Lord.”

His advice gets much worse from there and it's Hitler who picks up on these words and takes it a step further. Martin Luther was the most famous German who had ever lived up until the time of Hitler and so Hitler quoted him often, as well as the scriptures when it suited him and he could use them to instill conviction and passion in people for the horrors of what became the concentration camps where 6,000,000 innocent people were put to death.

I want to remind you as we see a rise in Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia that what we find happening in our own lives is an ability to become overcome by darkness. I'm not worried that any of you are going to do anything horrible, but I hope that we recognize that our Jewish friends are our brothers and sisters. God never canceled the covenant with them and Jesus himself was Jewish. We are human beings together as are the Muslims that we know and people of any other faith tradition. I always say that the challenge of being a follower of Jesus in today's world is how do we be passionate about our faith in Jesus Christ without being a bigot.

We may not believe the same things as others, but Jesus told us to pray for those who are different from us. At our best we are striving to live these high ideals of Jesus which calls us to love God and to love others as we love ourselves. There is no room for us to hate because Jesus tells us that when we hate another person, we are committing murder in our hearts because he knew how easily we can have our conviction turn into violence and hatred.

I think of the landlord who had been listening to talk radio that built

up fears in him about Palestinians and he killed a six-year-old boy and tried to kill his mother because they were Palestinian living in his building. How could this happen in America? What is wrong with us as human beings? At some point we need to turn off our phones and our televisions and spend time with people the way Jesus did.

Part of this story of Paul encourages us to name the brokenness in our world. We were created in the image of God and at some point, we also must acknowledge that there is something broken inside of us that leads us to sin and darkness. We must decide if we are going to allow the Holy Spirit to work inside of us to bring about the fruits of love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Before Paul is filled with the Holy Spirit he does horrible things as Saul, killing innocent people simply because they believe in a peasant named Jesus who was raised from the dead.

I'm more worried about what we say about our neighbors who are Republicans or Democrats or, God forbid, Independents. We have local elections going on right now and I worry more about what we say about those with whom we disagree. What are we saying about them? Are we taking the time to learn about what they actually believe and what they are advocating as they seek to run for office? It's fair game to criticize where politicians stand on certain issues, what it's not OK to do is dehumanize them by calling them names or making judgment without even taking the time to educate ourselves. Are we assuming the worst and bad-mouthing others with character assassinations?

I always find it fascinating that we have elections right after All Saints weekend. Are we willing to take seriously as people who follow Jesus the invitation to be Saints and to be cautious with our words and with our actions during political seasons? I find it powerful that after Paul's conversion he would write words in Ephesians 4 that are very appropriate for this season for us as followers of Jesus. My sense is that only someone who has been truly forgiven can write words like this after the life Paul had lived.

BIBLE

²⁹ Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth. Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say. ³⁰ Don't make the Holy Spirit of God unhappy—you were sealed by him for the day of redemption. ³¹ Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil. ³² Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ. (CEB)

No matter how you feel about former President Ronald Reagan, he said some very important words for everyone and every political party to hear during these seasons of elections.

GRAPHIC Ronald Reagan quote

“Too often character assassination has replaced debate in principle here in Washington. Destroy someone's reputation, and you don't have to talk about what he stands for.”

We should debate policies and ideas but we still must-see other people and treat them as human beings. We are always meant to treat people how Christ calls us to act. I have had some people tell me that we can set aside our Christian faith when it comes to politics, but I would argue the exact opposite is true. We need our Christian faith even more powerfully in these seasons.

What is important to remember is that it is never too late to turn around and go in a new direction. This is part of what the story of Saul who becomes Paul tells us. His conversion story is powerful in Acts 9.

BIBLE

Meanwhile, Saul was still spewing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest, ² seeking letters to the synagogues in Damascus. If he found persons who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, these letters would

authorize him to take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ During the journey, as he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven encircled him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice asking him, "Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?"

⁵ Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?"

"I am Jesus, whom you are harassing," came the reply. ⁶ "Now get up and enter the city. You will be told what you must do."

BIBLE

⁹ For three days he was blind and neither ate nor drank anything. (CEB)

Notice that in this story Paul was blinded by the light, and he was converted over the next three days. It didn't say the conversion happened instantaneously. The blindly ambitious man who is used to getting his own way and being in charge has this moment where he is incapacitated. He's had this experience of the risen Christ which in many ways is spiritual trauma in a good way as he is forced to evaluate his life and doesn't eat or drink anything while he ponders what has just happened. He just learned that everything he had been doing to serve God was the wrong thing and so his world was turned upside down.

Paul is spending this time at a house on Straight Street With a man named Judas. At the same time, a man in a different part of the city named Ananias was given a vision by God to go and see Paul. This is where the story gets crazy because Paul has papers to arrest Ananias and take him back to Rome to possibly be killed and at the very least be put into prison. Jesus comes to Ananias and tells him to go and find Saul and his honest response is, "Are you sure? That man has come here to hurt your followers and to put us in prison and maybe even kill us. What are you thinking?"

God calls Ananias to go to Paul and show him the way and help him see the truth and the life and baptize him. What do you imagine Ananias

felt like? He works up the courage, and does as he is asked by God and here is what we read happens next.

BIBLE

¹⁷ Ananias went to the house. He placed his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord sent me—Jesus, who appeared to you on the way as you were coming here. He sent me so that you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸ Instantly, flakes fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. ¹⁹ After eating, he regained his strength. (CEB)

Notice that Paul's conversion really happens when Ananias comes and shows up and lays hands on him and prays over him. His life was radically changed and the man who was persecuting followers of Jesus became the greatest advocate of the faith. He becomes a preacher and is willing to die for his faith as he plants churches. He is no longer driven by blind ambition and rage and hate but instead is driven by love which he writes about in so many passages in his letters.

This week we launch Operation Christmas Child, and I was struck by one of the videos sent to me to use this weekend. You're going to hear about the beauty of what it means to share the good news like the apostle Paul did after he was converted, but I want you to pay special attention to the final story **about the woman who came to Christ and how it changed her life.**

VIDEO OCC

I have often said to people that it's not our superior theological arguments which win people to Christ. It is our capacity and willingness to love people sacrificially, even to love our enemy and the one we are afraid of. Jesus didn't judge anyone into the Kingdom of God, but he loved them and offered them grace. He didn't convict others, but he invited them to receive the Holy Spirit and then they would experience that conviction inside of themselves. We convert people and we share the good news by loving them and not by giving them a convincing

argument. That's what happened in this story of this woman whose kids received a shoe box and then brought her the story and it loved on them and her life was changed.

We are called to love one another and even love our enemies as we love ourselves. When Paul was transformed, that hatred gave way to love in his life so he could go on and write passages like first Corinthians 13 where love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way but rejoices in the truth. He said he was nothing without love even if he could boast about his own accomplishments.

Change in our world and in our lives happens one heart at a time, healing happens, when we remember that we are called like the apostle Paul to turn around and go in a new direction. This is how the world changes and it's what Jesus showed us when he hung on the cross and he offered his life sacrificially. He demonstrated a selfless and sacrificial love which can change our lives. It's interesting that just before Paul writes these words in 1 Corinthians 13 about love he talks about what he learned about communion, what he called the Lord's supper, in 1 Corinthians 11.

BIBLE

²³ I received a tradition from the Lord, which I also handed on to you: on the night on which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread. ²⁴ After giving thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this to remember me." ²⁵ He did the same thing with the cup, after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Every time you drink it, do this to remember me." ²⁶ Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you broadcast the death of the Lord until he comes. (CEB)

I want to give you an invitation today as we come to the Lord's supper. If you are walking in the darkness and if you found yourself in a really dark place. Maybe you've wandered away from God. Inside you

might believe with your head but have not done anything with your heart. I want to invite you to be converted today and experience what Paul writes about in 2 Corinthians 5.

BIBLE

¹⁷ So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!

I want this to be true for each one of us. I invite each of us to surrender our lives to Christ as we come to the communion table today, whether it's for the first time or again to recommit to accepting the love of Christ. Next week we have a baptism weekend and maybe you want to get in the tub and either get baptized or reaffirm your baptism. We need this in our heart because like the apostle Paul we can miss it and have it in our head but not where it counts. I hope each of us today can put our trust in Christ and know him as our Lord and as our savior.

Let's pray together over these elements and over our time that we might recognize that we are human and we have all made mistakes. Let's come to this table and know that we are offered forgiveness and we can be made new. Let's also remember that we can be messengers of God's grace and so we pray that we might be filled at this table to be the presence of Jesus Christ in the world.

SLIDE Communion

November 1-2 Order

1. Jenny welcomes people.
2. Song: “Who You Say I Am”
3. Jeff welcomes people:
 - a. QR Code and Connect Card
 - b. Communion Invitation
 - c. Invite people to greet each other, however comfortable and be seated.
4. Sermon
5. Song: “The Love of God”
6. Song: “Morning by Morning”
7. Prayer and Lord’s Prayer
8. Offering (**Operation Christmas Child Shoeboxes**)
9. Med Moments
10. Care Ministers
11. Connect with Us
12. Closing Prayer