

## **THE MOST UNLIKELY CONVERT**

### **ACTS 9:1-9**

Today I would like to challenge some of the presumptions that we all struggle with in our Christian Walk

#### **PRESUMPTION – TO PRE-ASSUME**

- Good people go to heaven bad people go to hell
- Bad people deserve the judgement they get – the more wicked they are, the more judgement they deserve
- Some people are too wicked to be saved
- Heaven is a reward for good works

Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25, Luke 18:25

Mark 10:15-26

*17 As He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone.*

*19 You know the commandments, 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'"*

*20 And he said to Him, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up."*

*21 Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."*

*22 But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property.*

*23 And Jesus, looking around, \*said to His disciples, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!"*

*24 The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus \*answered again and \*said to them, "**Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!** 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."*

<sup>26</sup> They were even more astonished and said to Him, “Then who can be saved?”

<sup>27</sup> Looking at them, Jesus \*said, “With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.”

### **The message was this:**

- **Those who do not feel the need to trust in God** → will never seek God’s counsel
- **Those who feel self-righteous,** → will never seek the righteousness of God
- **Those who feel no need for God’s forgiveness** → will never seek God’s forgiveness.

### **The disciples asked the question- “How then can anyone be saved?”**

### **If MANKIND IS UNSAVABLE, HOW CAN THE UNSAVABLE BE SAVED?**

Jesus gives His reply- **with man it is impossible** – Man in his natural state is most interested in **MAN** – and cannot save himself.

– **But with God? All things are possible!** – It takes a work of God to begin the process from sinner to saint –

- **And it takes a sinner willing then to confess that he is in fact a sinner and in need a savior before there is any hope of salvation.**

And the amazing truth is this – **If anyone** – regardless of the sins in their past – is willing to accept and believe this truth – and then to cry out to God for forgiveness – **there is none that God will not save from his righteous judgment.**

### **\*Praise God!!**

In today’s passage we meet for the second time a man who felt no need for God’s forgiveness.

- His name was Saul. He was a member of the Pharisees in Jerusalem.
- If you are looking for an example of a wicked man, Saul would have fit the bill!
- A denier of Jesus as the Son of God, Lord and Savior – One who slandered the name of Jesus – Misused the name and the authority of God

- Who arrested innocent people for nothing more than believing the things Saul thought were untrue.
- These he had arrested, jailed, beaten and put to death. **All in the name of God!**

Historians estimate that in about 5AD Saul was born in the city of Tarsus, a town in the Roman provinces of Cilicia. (Modern day Turkey)

Tarsus was a significant city being located about 12 miles inland from the Mediterranean docks and was known for its robust trade markets and education centers.

Saul was born to a Jewish family of means who also possessed Roman citizenship.

Therefore, Saul also was born with an identification as both a Jew and Roman citizen.

We read in Acts 22:4 that as a young man, Saul's family moved to Jerusalem where he grew up.

Saul was accepted into one of the most prestigious schools in Jerusalem to learn the Hebrew scriptures and undertake in-depth studies of the Law of Moses under the highly respected Rabbi Gamaliel.

He likely graduated at the top of his class and at some point, following his education, Saul was accepted into the ranks of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees, along with the Sadducees, were the ruling and governing class of the Jews in Israel.

Years later, **Saul**, *his Hebrew name*, would go by **Paul**, *his Roman name*, and would speak of his accomplishments during the time of these events recorded in the book of Acts-

### **Philippians 3:4-6**

*<sup>4</sup> although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more:*

*<sup>5</sup> circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin,*

*a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee;*

*<sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church;*

*as to the righteousness, which is in the Law, found blameless.*

I want to clearly paint the picture of Saul for us.

- **Saul was highly educated man.**
  - Fluent in Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew languages.

- **A proud man** of a proud family, of a proud nation, living in a proud city.
- **A self-made man** – having attended to the best schools, receiving the best grades.
- **A zealous man** - Serving among the Pharisees – whose duty it was to uphold the laws and traditions of the Jewish teachings.

**And so it was** this zealous Pharisee found himself at the **tip of the spear** defending the righteousness of God - from whom he **PRESUMED** to be **liars, heretics, blasphemers, and followers of a false Messiah.**

**Back in Acts 7:58** – we watched as Saul, as he held the cloaks of the other religious leaders as they stoned to death Stephen, a man guilty only of proclaiming the word of God and Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ – the promised Messiah.

**We read in Acts 8:1** that Saul was in hearty agreement with putting Stephen to death.

After all – unless his words were true, they amounted to blasphemy. **And surely his words could not be true.** (*Could they?*)

Yes, this Jesus had spoken with wisdom and power.

Yes, this Jesus had performed signs and wonders.

- **BUT HE WAS JUST A MAN!** (*Wasn't He?*)

**A man who declared Himself to be equal with God!**

- *John 10:30 "I and the Father are one."*

**Who claimed to be the only means of access to the resurrection!**

- *John 14:6 "I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father but through Me."*

For Saul, arresting, imprisoning, persecuting and putting to death those who taught, held and proclaimed these "lies" was his sworn duty as a Pharisee.

**And because Saul was a zealous man,** he conducted this duty with **passion.**

Saul was convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was a false prophet.

He was convinced, in spite of rumors to the contrary, that Jesus of Nazareth was dead.

He likely agreed with the state's story that His body, if truly missing, was likely stolen by those who sought some manner of fame by attaching themselves to His memory.

**And worse!** – For a devout Pharisee like Saul - was to see the people of Israel turn from the **TRUTH** of the law, to follow the teachings of a dead man!

From the **OBEDIENCE** to the law, from **HONORING** their long-held traditions,

**To follow a dead teacher with false claims of forgiveness for sins and eternal life.**

As a Pharisee, Saul knew the word of God. He knew that ONE DAY – SOME DAY - the Messiah WOULD come –

*But surely it had not been this "Jesus" who was God's chosen and the eternal King of the Jews! This man was NO king! He had no kingdom, no army, no power.*

*He had not even attempted to defend Himself before Israel's enemies and had been led off like a lamb to the slaughter when arrested and condemned.*

We read in Acts 8:3 that it became Saul's single focus to oppose the memory and the teaching of Jesus by opposing those who followed Him.

**Acts 8:3** But Saul began **ravaging** the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.

**Later in life, Saul/Paul would look back on these days and proclaim:**

**Acts 26:4-18 Before King Agrippa**

*<sup>4</sup> "So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem; <sup>5</sup> since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion.*

*<sup>9</sup> "So then, I thought to myself **that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.***

*<sup>10</sup> And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death, **I cast my vote against them.***

*<sup>11</sup> And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, **I tried to force them to blaspheme;** (to renounce their faith and deny Jesus as the Christ)*

and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.

### **Acts 22:3-11**

<sup>3</sup>“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, **being zealous for God** just as you all are today. <sup>4</sup> **I persecuted this Way to the death**, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, <sup>5</sup> as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify.

From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished.

**Though highly educated**, Saul was ignorant regarding the truth of Jesus.

**Though possessing great intellect**, he was foolish regarding the truth of Jesus.

**Though he had great insight**, Saul was spiritually blind.

**God was about to make Saul's ignorance, foolishness and blindness abundantly clear to him!**

### **ACTS 9:1-9 Redeeming the Unredeemable**

<sup>1</sup>Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, <sup>2</sup> and asked for letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, **so that if he found any belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them in shackles to Jerusalem.**

What a heart wrenching contrast!

**Jesus came to save the lost** – He came **FIRST** for the people of Israel and then to the Gentile and the whole world!

- As a sacrifice, a propitiation, to atone for the sin of all those who believe.
- To redeem a people from every tribe, nation and tongue, to be a people and a kingdom unto God.

### **John 1:11-13**

He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. **But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God**, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

**And here is this religious ruler of the Jews, *the Pharisee Saul*, so focused on eliminating the teaching “Jesus of Nazareth” and persecuting any who dared to proclaim His name as the Son of God.**

Saul had been there and heard the persuasive words of Steven, as he spoke God’s word and made an argument against Israel and in favor of Jesus-

- BUT SAUL WAS NOT SWAYED

**Such is the heart of so many so focused on their ways. Locked into their PRESUMPTIONS.**

**Convinced they are right and unable to even consider the truth presented to them.**

After the killing of Stephen, Saul sought legal authority from the Jewish government to arrest and treat harshly of any who were associated with the “church” of this Jesus – who called themselves **“THE WAY.”**

The church at that time referred to themselves as **THE WAY** – because Jesus declared **He was THE WAY, the Truth and the Life, and that NO man would come before God except through Him.**

Because of the persecution, followers of Jesus Christ fled the city –

Ambassadors of Christ went out – and the word of Christ Jesus spread –

And the church GREW!

Saul was so committed to silencing the message of Jesus that he asked for, and was granted, authority from the Sanhedrin, the ruling government of the Jews, to go out, far beyond Jerusalem, as far as Damascus.

There to search out, arrest, and bring back in chains ANY Jew who claimed Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ.

This was no light undertaking! – Damascus was the capital city of Syria – some **160 miles** NE of Jerusalem!

One can imagine the zealous Pharisee Saul sitting tall astride his mount riding to Damascus with such powerful orders tucked in his pouch!

**This callous, self-righteous, “Vigilante-for-God”, fighting his own, personal, holy war against “Jesus” and His followers.**

<sup>3</sup> Now as he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; <sup>4</sup> and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

Remember, the account we are reading here is from the studies of Luke, as he wrote to Theophilus about the events that proceeded and followed the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

**Saul himself would later expand on this encounter as explained the event to his own people and later to King Agrippa.**

**ACTS 26:12-15**

*<sup>12</sup> "While so engaged as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, <sup>13</sup> at midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me. <sup>14</sup> And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' <sup>15</sup> And I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.*

Others around Saul saw the light – the shekinah glory of God – and it drove them to their knees.

**It was a SHOWDOWN AT HIGH-NOON!** And God got Saul's attention.

**For all that Saul had done wrong – God had a plan to do something right with Saul's life.**

Friends, if you take nothing else out of this lesson today – take this – It does not matter How much – How long – or How wicked your life has been –

If God places before you the opportunity to repent and to walk with Him –

- With your one acknowledgment in faith – He will forgive you completely, restore you fully, and empower you with the Holy Spirit of God to be born again and receive eternal life.

*Romans 10:9 "If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."*

That day, on the road to Damascus, Saul, the **ignorant, blind, and foolish** man – had a personal encounter with the risen Messiah, the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth.

*"Saul, why are you persecuting me?"*

Saul who had committed his life to hunting Christians – was now being confronted by Christ!

As a matter of paraphrase – *"Saul! You who are so zealous and committed to serving God- why are you persecuting {diōkō} me?!"*



- Persecute- to treat with hostility

***“It is hard for you to kick against the goads”***

A saying rooted in the culture of the day.

The ox was placed in the yoke to guide it. If the ox tried to ignore the yoke and force its own way, the handler had a sharp, pointed stick, **a goad**, to prod the ox back on track.

The more the ox resisted, the harder the goading became.

*The moral of the saying was that it is far easier to follow the guiding than to kick at the goad!*

Paul was a man of great zeal – but he was stubborn and he lacked understanding!

- **And he was about to get goaded!!**

Even in this moment, Saul perceives the **LIGHT** – he perceives the **VOICE** – but he does not perceive the **ONE** who spoke with him...

*<sup>5</sup>And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,*

Can you imagine this moment for Saul?! – Saul asks who is speaking, using the Greek word “kurios” for a man of influence or power.

**Jesus replies “I am Jesus, ... whom you are persecuting.”**

- *Jesus?! How can this be?! -Jesus was NOT the Christ - Jesus is DEAD!*

Saul’s whole world was now spinning!

*<sup>6</sup>but get up and enter the city, and it will be told to you what you must do.”*

Jesus rocked Saul’s whole presumed position and then gave him clear instructions on what to do next.

- Friends, this is important.

Understand that this conversion of Saul happened **in the same manner as have all conversions.**

**It begins with a Holy God – dealing personally with a fallen sinner**

**Ephesians 1:4-5** tells us- *He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons.*

**But the next step is ours to take.**

If God is moving on the heart – then that heart will be enabled to ask the question: *“What then must I do to be saved?”*

And as we will see in Acts 16 the answer is: *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”*

**It is true – we are saved by God’s Sovereign Grace.**

Were it not for this, and His amazing love, there would be no hope of forgiveness.

But like the story of the powerful and rich man that we spoke of at the beginning of the sermon – **Not all, will answer the call.**

Jesus’ lesson to that man had been to those who claim a self-righteousness – they must willingly submit everything to God and follow Jesus – to receive true righteousness.

In our natural state, sinful state, that is something we will not do.

But with the Holy Spirit working in our lives? It is something we CAN DO –

**IF** - we choose to believe, choose to trust in HIS righteousness, and choose to follow HIS way.

*Ephesians 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God;*

For Saul, this was the moment when he was confronted with the truth. As many after him have been confronted with the truth by those who proclaim the gospel.

The question is what would Saul DO with that truth?

*7 The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.*

This was a unique encounter between Jesus and Saul.

Like other places in the Book of Acts, we are seeing unique encounters and unique events as God sets up the foundations of His church.

And although believers today **may not have a visual and audible** encounter with Jesus – **everyone who is saved today has had a PERSONAL encounter with Jesus.**

Because we do not have faith in a **religion, or a teaching, or a concept.**

We have a **faith**, and a **relationship**, with the living God and our living Savior, Christ Jesus, the Lord.

**I am going to leave off here today.**

**Today we are going to leave Saul on his knees in the middle of the road to Damascus. Surrounded by a brilliant light, and with the words of Jesus fresh in his ears.**

**Next week we will “see” that God left Saul “blind” that day.**

As we leave the text today, I want you to consider that at one time,

- **We are all blind** until our eyes are opened
- **We were all deaf** until we were given ears to hear
- **We all had hearts of stone**, until we were given a new heart
- **And, we were all dead**, until we were born again!

**Remember that I told you I wanted to talk about presumptions?**

- **Those things people pre-assume to be true without verifying the truth of the thing?**

We all make casual presumptions every day – We presume the drive to work or across town will not result in a fatal car crash.

We presume the elevator, suspended by thin and poorly maintained cables, will hold our weight as it lifts and lowers us through great heights.

We presume the food we eat and the water we drink will not poison us

**But of much greater importance and consequence are weightier presumptions people hold to during the fleeting days of their life.**

**Like Saul,**

**They presume that Jesus is not the Son of God, Not the Savior-** because they cannot physically interact with Him.

**They presume the word of God is not true-** because the stories found there lack supportive proof that is beyond doubt and fails to teach what they have come to believe is the truth.

**Some presume that IF there is a heaven** – they will go there because they are self-righteous- a good person- as if somehow their works and behavior might grant them eternal life.

Connecting this with our first example from scripture of the rich young man – we see that Saul was in a very similar place, confronted with the truth, and with a choice to make.

**How hard is the journey from sinner to saint for the one who does not know he is a sinner, in need of a Savior? – Impossible!!**

But as Jesus said- *“With God, all things are possible.”*

Let’s pray.