



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**The Surprising Acts
of God VI:
God's Team**
Rev. Louise Rogers

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Acts 9:1-9

The Conversion of Saul

Meanwhile 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 who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

God's Team

Let's talk baseball, Pirate baseball. We politely say, the Pirates are off to a slow start this year, their record is 17 and 22. Last night they won! They have brought on lots of young talent including an up-and-coming star, a

hometown boy, Dave Bednar who grew up in Mars, PA. Dave is a relief pitcher. From the time he was a little boy he wanted to play baseball and be on a major league team, especially the Pittsburgh Pirates. Dave worked hard, received good coaching and with his God-given talent he finally made the team in the major leagues! His mother said in a recent interview, “when Dave comes to town he is surrounded not only by the Pirate fans but by his own fans who watched him grow up and progress all the way to the major leagues. He is now on his dream team.” Don’t we all have stories of kids who work hard and achieve their goals in life? Actually, Dave’s story could apply to practically any walk of life – this is good! When it comes being on God’s team we don’t have to try out. The Lord has a surprising, amazing plan in store for each of us. We get to see God’s plan, crystal clear, in the conversion of Saul.

Saul aspired to be on a dream team too. Living long before baseball was an organized team, he chose another vocation. Saul was passionate about his faith. Saul aspired to be on God’s Team. Conditions looked good for Saul as he was born in a prestigious religious family, studied at the Harvard of religious schools, met with the elders in the temple to glean their wisdom. He became an expert in the law knowing what was right, who was in and who was out of God’s favor. Saul wanted to be the best and keep his religion pure. Saul knew the rules of the game. As a successful and ambitious man, he had a mission: to keep his beloved

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Judaism pure. When he discovered a cult called The Way, made up of the followers of one Jesus of Nazareth he set out to Damascus have them arrested.

While riding along, Saul encountered a blinding light, was knocked off his high horse and heard these piercing words, "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?" In a flash, all that Saul knew so well was upended. Blinded by the light, for three days Saul sits in the dark and in the darkness, he began to truly see. What he discovers is that Jesus Christ is real. God loves him and offers him grace. "Grace isn't a little prayer you chant before receiving a meal. It's a way to live." Grace is a church word that we need to understand. Grace is the undeserved love of God given to us. Think of a present that someone gives to you. You receive the gift not by your own efforts- you receive the gift because someone has bought the gift for you. Now Saul receives the gift from God of love and faith. A believer Ananias is sent to care for him, to open his eyes and baptize Saul in the faith. The same baptism we celebrate today. Saul was not condemned for his past. Instead, he was told how to begin something new.

Why do we care to much about this one man's story of faith? A few fun facts about Saul- This man was not one of the original twelve disciples, but he saw the living Jesus and became an apostle – now he speaks with authority. That is important because he wrote most of the letters in the New Testament. We read those letters today and they form our faith. His name

was changed to Paul and the Apostle Paul teaches, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." Ephesians 3. This man will go on to plant churches all around the Mediterranean region. When he opens the doors of the church everyone is invited in. Not just the Jews, everyone, even you and me. All of us as part of God's plan. Love, grace is the is the key.

Philosopher Dostoyevsky once said, "To love a person means to see him as God intended him to be." Paul was the least likely person in the world it seemed to become a Christian. Here he was trying to arrest followers of the WAY and God came to make him an apostle. God knew his heart. The Holy Spirit still changes our hearts today. When we pray to God and follow the Lord's leading, we will be able to love in an extraordinary way too. I wonder what would happen if we looked upon our adversaries or enemies with the loving eyes of Christ. Consider, for a moment, the awesome change that could occur if we prayed for the wisdom and courage to see others as God sees them: to see that boss who insulted us, that friend who betrayed us, or that sibling who wounded us as a child of God. Could it be that our hearts would be transformed as radically as Paul's was on the Damascus road?

Grace justifies us before God. Timothy D. Keller, a pastor in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, shares this account. He notes that on September 8, 1998, St. Louis Cardinals first baseman Mark McGwire made history

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by hitting his 62nd home run of the baseball season. It was an emotional moment for four people sitting in the VIP section of the stadium. They were the grown children of Roger Maris, the man who hit 61 home runs in 1961 to establish the record. The children of Roger Maris were an important part of the celebration that night. Yet none of them had played a major league baseball game in their lives. Maris' children did not receive special attention because of what they had done, but rather because of who their father was. He had made it possible for them to be present and honored because of his achievement years before. "One day," says pastor Keller, "we will sit down at a feast with Jesus Christ and enjoy the benefits of the eternal kingdom, not because of what we have done but because our heavenly Father redeemed us through Christ." That is grace.

We can all be on God's team.

God's grace is for all of us.

You are not too dirty for God to cleanse.

You are not too broken for God to fix.

You are not too far for God to reach.

You are not too Guilty for God to forgive,
and you are not too worthless for God to love.

Prodigal Daughters.

Grace redeems all. Thanks be to God.

Amen.



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