

Book of Acts Series - Part 43 | the Most Unlikely Christian

by Jim Cymbala

Jim Cymbala's sermon explores the dramatic transformation of Paul from a persecutor of Christians to a devoted apostle, highlighting the power of God's grace and the importance of personal testimony in faith.

Duration: 34:27

Scripture: Deuteronomy 21:23, Isaiah 52:7, Acts 9:1

Topics: "Book Of Acts"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares a powerful testimony about a man named Paul, who was once a persecutor of Christians but later became a follower of Jesus. The speaker emphasizes that God's love and grace are limitless, and there is no sin too great for God to forgive. The speaker encourages the audience to share their own testimonies and to always be ready to talk about Jesus and the transformation he brings. The sermon also highlights the importance of God's grace and the reason why Paul endured hardships and risks for his faith.

Transcript

For some months now, we've been going through the book of Acts, and now we come to a very dramatic moment, and it's the last moment we're going to see Paul under the spotlight, imprisonment. He's been arrested, and for those of you that are visiting, Paul was once, as we're going to see, a persecutor of the Christian church. Now he's an apostle.

He's a preacher. He's an evangelist. He's going out and starting churches.

He's been doing this for years. But now in Jerusalem, he is attacked by a mob, the Roman soldiers who maintain order in Israel because Israel is part of the Roman Empire at this point in time, 2,000 years ago. He's put under into their custody, and he ends up in a town on the Mediterranean called Caesarea, and at this time, he is under the custody of the governor whose name is Festus, F-E-S-T-U-S.

And Governor Festus doesn't know what to do with him because although the Jews are pressing to get him killed, the Jewish religious leaders, he cannot find a charge that will stick that the Roman government can then go and execute Paul as they want them to. So he's kind of stuck, and he doesn't know what to do. And now we learned last week that Paul has said, no, I'm not going to Jerusalem because he knows

they're going to try to kill him there.

He says, no, I'm a Roman citizen. I appeal to Caesar. I want to go to Rome and be tried.

And if I've done something that deserves death, I'm not afraid of that, then take my life. But I'm not going with them. They're not going to give me an objective hearing.

They've got an agenda. I want to go to Rome. So Festus now is going to send him to Rome, which is going to take up the rest of the book of Acts, his trip to Rome.

But he doesn't still know what the charge is. If you're going to send someone to Caesar, you've got to have a charge so he can be tried in a proper way. Now, who comes and visits him while Paul is languishing there in prison, who visits him is King Agrippa, who's one of the Herod family from King Herod.

And this is quite a family in New Testament. King Herod the Great, the one who built the temple that was there when Jesus was walking on earth, he was the one who had all the babies killed in Bethlehem, trying to locate this possible Messiah that might be a threat to him. His son was the one who beheaded John the Baptist and who Jesus called the Fox.

And then another one of his relatives was the one who had James, the brother of John, killed in the book of Acts. So Paul now, this is the dramatic scene. Paul is brought in and Festus has told King Agrippa, could you hear him out? You're Jewish.

I don't, I'm not into this. I don't roll that way. I don't know what charge I should put on him, but I got to send him to Rome now.

He's appealed as a citizen and we're going to obey the law and but what charge should we give? Could you give it a hearing? King Agrippa says, I want to hear. So he and his wife are there and Governor Festus is there and they all have authority kind of to take Paul's life. And Paul's brought in.

So this is the dramatic scene. There's other people on the outskirts of this scene, but it's Paul and it's Governor Festus and it's King Agrippa. Now King Agrippa is going to say, okay, Paul, you can speak on and make your defense.

And we're not going to read the whole sermon, but this is full of interest. We might spend a little time in this because it shows us so much about his message, his life, what Christianity was like 2000 years ago, why it was so powerful in converting people to the cause of Christ. We're going to read it with interest.

Why did God put this in the Bible and what can we learn from it? So let's first get the historical narrative. Then Agrippa said to Paul, you have permission to speak for yourself. So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense.

King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews. And especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. A little side note.

History tells us that Agrippa happened to be raised with a lot of religious training. So he knew a lot about the Jewish religion. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.

Very polite, very logical. The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child. From the beginning of my life in my own country and also in Jerusalem.

They have known me, this is in Acts 26, for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion. I live living as a Pharisee. All right, side note, there were two groups, main groups in Judaism at this time.

There were the Sadducees who were more liberal and more connected with government position. And then there were the Pharisees, the Hasidim, the ultra-Orthodox. And they were respected by the people.

They were full of self-righteousness. They were very legalistic. And Paul says, I wasn't of the liberal group.

I wasn't a Sadducee. I was a Pharisee. I was raised as a Pharisee.

I was ultra-Orthodox. So know that as I'm giving my defense. And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today.

This is the promise our 12 tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. He's probably talking about both the coming of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead. King Agrippa, it's because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me.

Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? In other words, now he's going to lead to Jesus and he says, if you find this fantastic that Jesus died and rose again from the dead, why should you? If God is God and he has all power, why can't he raise a dead person? That's his argument. Because then he wants to show that Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead. And that all people eventually, all everybody in this building, we're going to be raised from the dead.

Death does not end anything. It leads to the final judgment and then ushers in eternity. I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priest, I put many of the Lord's people in prison. And when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.

Many a time, I went from one synagogue to another. There were many in Jerusalem to have them punished. And I tried to force them to blaspheme.

I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities. On one of these journeys, I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priest from Jerusalem. About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven brighter than the sun blazing around me and my companions.

We all fell to the ground and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads or the spikes. Then I asked, who are you, Lord? I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, the Lord replied. Now get up and stand on your feet.

I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified or set apart by faith in me.

So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. In other words, that's why I'm here because this is what happened and when he told me what he's going to do with me, I didn't shirk it. I didn't rebel.

I did what he asked me to do and he's been helping me and that's why I'm here today. I've been preaching this message and I'm a believer in this Nazarene Jesus Christ. So basically, before we apply it to ourselves and see what we can gather from this defense of Paul, and there's more to it, God willing we'll get to it maybe next week.

We have, just looking at Paul, these three things about him. That he opposed and fought Jesus. Number two, he then met Jesus.

Then number three, he obeyed Jesus. That's simple. He opposed Jesus.

That's what he's telling us. Then he's saying, I met Jesus and then he's saying, I obeyed Jesus. I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, to the word that the Lord spoke to me.

Notice here again, brothers and sisters, we've seen it a number of times and those of you watching on the webcast, notice the power of testimony. When Paul makes his defense, he does not say, I'd like to open now to the book of such and such. There were no new testament yet, but he didn't say, let's turn to the book of Psalms and I'm going to show you a promise about Jesus.

Or I'd like to give a dissertation on the book of chapter 21 of Deuteronomy. Or let's look at Isaiah 52 and analyze it. No.

When he's put in front of these people, Gentiles, Jews, non-believers, he gives his testimony. Everyone who's a Christian has a testimony. Testimonies are very powerful.

Everyone who's a Christian has a testimony. I was here, I met him, and I'm now here. How many have a testimony? Lift up your hand.

I was here, then I met him, now I'm here. Everyone has a testimony. And notice how quickly, whenever Paul's in a bind, he says, let me tell you my story.

Then I'm going to tell you about this Jesus who's part of my story. So always be ready to share your testimony. In the subway, talking to anybody, say, listen, I'm not trying to get you to join my church.

I'm not a Protestant. I'm not a charismatic. I'm a Christian.

But here's why I am a Christian. I was here, lost, lonely, fearful, whatever, and now I'm here. Do we understand everything of how God does things? No.

Do we understand everything that's happened in our life? No. But Paul says, I was here, then I met him, now I'm here. It begins by he fought Jesus.

And this is an amazing thing. That the man we're reading about, the man we're focused on, the man who writes a good part of the New Testament, was a scoundrel with a capital S. He was an Antichrist with a small a, because nobody could be more Antichrist than Paul. He says, now look, I was raised, although born north of Israel, in Tarsus, I was raised here and part of the strictest sect of Judaism.

So I'm not some Johnny-come-lately, fly-by-night person who was never religious. No, I was severely, deeply religious. And I wasn't with the Sadducees, I was with the Pharisees.

Okay? The strictest sect. You can check it out. Agrippa, check it out.

Okay. And I too, in case you have any animosity toward Christianity, I too felt that it was incumbent upon me to do many evil things against the name or the cause of Jesus. I hated the name of Jesus.

Isn't this amazing? Doesn't it make us stop and think that the man who's going to write most of the New Testament and who's focused on here was a hater of Jesus. Not a drunkard, not a drug abuser, not some, I'm not into religion. No, no.

Very religious, but anti-Christ, anti-Jesus. He said, and I worked it out this way, that I persecuted them as much as I could all over Jerusalem. I went to all the synagogues I could find and I harassed them and hassled them.

And when I could get a religious charge against them, I voted against them, consented to their death. In other places, he references the fact that he was the cause of the death of Christians. So here's an anti-Christ, Christ-hating, Christian-killing, Christian-persecuting man.

It reminds us of the incredible grace of God. He says, not only that, but I became obsessed with this thing. So I would gather the Christians and I would say to them, now curse Jesus.

No, I don't want to know. Torture them. I had them beat in synagogues.

There was a lash used by the synagogue leaders and the Jews would carry on and persecute people who left the way that they thought was correct. So he said, I not only had them beat, but I would try to get them to blaspheme and deny their faith. I mean, this is a guy who's out of it.

This is a guy who won't let it go. This is a guy who is all in to destroy the Christian faith. I not only went about doing that in the synagogues in Jerusalem, that wasn't enough for me.

I was all, all in. And I would go to other cities. I would go to other synagogues and other towns so that I could find more of these people who didn't believe the way they should believe and believe that the Messiah had come and his name was Jesus and he died on the cross for the sins of the world.

So this is a scoundrel of the first order. This is a person that if you and I were living today and we were living back in that day and we heard the name Saul of Tarsus, the blood pressure goes up. We're concerned that he's even around because he's out to destroy you.

He's out to destroy me. Then he says, I met Jesus. I was hating based on ignorance.

But then I was going to Damascus. Why? Not for R&R. I was going there to get with credentials and authority from the religious leaders in Jerusalem.

I was going into Syria to Damascus where all the conflict is going on today now. And I went there to go to those synagogues because I heard there were Jews who believe in Jesus there and any Jew who believes in Yeshua is my target. So he says, I'm on the way and at noontime at the brightest part.

And by the way, one commentator has brought out an interesting thing. Back in those days, it's so hot in the Middle East that no one hardly ever traveled at noontime unless you were in an emergency trip. And this was the dedication of this persecutor of Christians.

He's traveling at high noon. He's not going to rest in the heat of the day. He's got to go about his business.

He said, then a light shone brighter than the sun and it overwhelmed all of us that I was traveling with and we were all knocked down. And I heard this voice saying, Saul, Saul in Aramaic, a form of a kind of Hebrew that was spoken that day by the common people. Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Well, who are you? I am Jesus.

It's hard for you to fight against the goads or against the spikes. And what that was, everybody knew what that meant back then. If you had an oxen and you were running just a single plow, the plow guy riding the plow, he had this long prong with a spike at the end.

And the oxen, when you put the yoke on the oxen, they would fight it and try to get out of it and not be going and doing their work. So the minute they fought, he would just stick them, just stick them. In other words, the more you fight, the more you get stuck.

Now, if there was a wagon of some kind that the oxen were dragging, it would be built in on the bottom part of the wagon that the minute they would kick and fight against it, they would actually get cut by these spikes, these goads. And Jesus says to him, it's hard for you to fight against the goads, isn't it? What was that? What were the goads? What were the spikes? It probably is that when Stephen, the first Christian martyr that we read about earlier in the book of Acts, when Stephen, who was not a minister, a pastor, an evangelist, he was a deacon, but he was mightily used by God to testify about Jesus. When Stephen gave his testimony, because they hated him so much, the religious authorities, before they stoned him, he was preaching and sharing Christ.

And now they went to stone him and to get, they had to take their coats off to throw him. And guess what they did? They took their coats off and they laid them at the feet of Saul of Tarsus. So we know that Saul, as a younger man, saw Stephen get stoned to death.

And he saw and he heard Stephen say, Lord, don't lay this to their charge. Don't count this against them. They don't know what they're doing.

It seems like that left an impression on Saul of Tarsus. That was planted in his heart. Wait a minute, there's something real about this.

Who could be loving and kind even when people are stoning you? And that thing in his conscience, that thing planted in his heart must have been that thing he was fighting against. And maybe that's why he was so vehement in his persecution of Christians, because something in him was telling him, they're right, they're right. And to stamp that voice out, he tried to kill him even the more.

So after the Lord tells him it's hard to fight against the spikes, against the goads, he says, now get on your feet, because I've chosen you, chosen you, of all the people in the world to be chosen. The name of this message, should you want to get a copy of it, is the most unlikely Christian, because the most unlikely Christian in the entire Bible is the Apostle Paul, who turns out to be the greatest Christian. But he's the most unlikely.

He has no qualifications to be a Christian. He's not searching for Jesus. He's trying to wipe out the name of Jesus.

Stand on your feet, because I've chosen you, and I've appointed you to be my witness. You're going to go to both Jew and Gentile, and I'm going to be with you. And it won't always be easy, it goes on to say, but I'm going to be there.

And now Paul's standing there and saying, look, I was against him, then I met him, and now I have to obey him, after all he's done for me. I hated his guts. I hated his name.

I was killing Christians. And then he reveals himself to me, and I find out that I'm all wrong, 100% wrong. And instead of striking me down, and I know he could have killed me, because the light was greater than the sun, and he knocked me off my horse.

And if he knocked me off my horse, he could have taken my life away. But instead of killing me, he appoints me to be in the ministry. He loves me so much, that he forgives everything I've done in the past.

What kind of God is this? What kind of Jesus is this? And he says, now I was not disobedient to that heavenly vision. How could I disobey him? How could I let him down? After what he put up with me? After all he endured for me? After all the aggravation I caused his name, and his church, and his people, and the saints that I chase hither and yon? No, I was against him, but then I met him, and then I'm for him. I'm going to obey him.

I was not disobedient to that heavenly vision. I went about and did what he called me to do. What are the lasting lessons for us? Number one, is this not amazing? Do you understand this, brothers and sisters in the choir? Do you understand this, ladies and gentlemen? Do you get it out here? Do you get the fact that what God rejoices in is forgiving people of their sins? Don't you get it that the reason he chose Paul, Saul of Tarsus, was as an example for all of us, that there's no pit of iniquity that's so deep that God's love is not deeper still.

Can we say amen to that? There's nothing you can do. There's nothing you've done. I don't care how many times you've repeated it.

Obviously he had some light because he was fighting against the gods. God specializes in taking hopeless cases and making them blessings. God specializes in taking enemies and people who we would reject and even be afraid of and say, no, watch what I can do.

One touch of my love in their life, and I can change them and make them into a new creation. Paul later says in a letter to Timothy, who was a younger minister, it's another part of the New Testament for those of you who might be visiting. He says, no, don't you get it, Timothy.

God saved me as an example for all future generations. I was the lowest of the low. I was the chief of sinners.

I wasn't a sinner. I was the worst sinner. I wasn't a bad guy.

I was the worst guy. It wasn't that I didn't care. I did care.

I wanted to wipe out his name and wipe out his followers. And he still loved me. Do you get it? He still loved me.

He loved me so much. He went after me. I wasn't looking for him.

He went after me. Isn't that why we're here today? Did you go looking for him or did he go looking for you? Oh, the grace of God. See, what God wants to do is extol his grace.

That's why I never give up on anybody. Don't write anybody off. Never write anybody off because God loves to work with the chiefs of sinners.

And if you're a believer here today and you fail the Lord, you've drifted away and you've messed up over and over again, don't believe what the devil tells you. When he says he hates you now, he loves you now. He loves you now because he is love.

This is a love story. Don't you get it? Paul's telling us a love story. He's saying I was against him, but he was for me.

He looked for me. He found me. He revealed himself to me.

How can I not obey him? How can I not live for him now? He could have killed me. Did you know that Paul was so vicious that after he got converted and he made his first trip to Jerusalem, the believers wouldn't even receive him? They wouldn't get near him because his name was famous. What? Saul of Tarsus.

Yeah, he's going to be sharing tonight. I'm not going. Let someone else speak.

I'm not going. No, no, it's real. Maybe it's real.

Maybe it's not. He's so evil. He's so cunning.

He might be slipping into our midst so that he can kill even more. That's what he was. The man who wrote the New Testament that you and I read was killing Christians.

Oh, the marvelous grace of God. Can we put our hands together and just thank God for his grace? That's what I live for. My wife and I have seen a lot over the years, but I still live for that.

That's what makes me the happiest I can be is when I see someone who is way out or way off and God changes them. Oh my goodness. And nothing's too far for God.

I don't care what your son or daughter is doing, or the one that you've just run into this week, and you say, oh no, there's a hopeless case. There's no hopeless cases with God. That's why Paul tells his story in such detail.

Nothing's hopeless with God. And we have to be open for God to bring in here people who the world says are, get out of here. Even the world doesn't want them around.

Many years ago, I was in the front of the building in our previous facility, and I was backing up like this, talking to somebody and saying, I'll see you. And I bumped into a blonde woman with high heels on. And I looked and suddenly the voice came out and went, yo, that's okay, man.

I quickly looked for the Adam's apple and sure enough, it was there. Ricardo was a transvestite hustling as a male prostitute on the lower west side of Manhattan. And he was looking good.

I went to my wife who was on the keyboard and I said, see the blonde in the black dress, black dress, black high heels. I said, that's not a woman. That's a man.

She said, I don't believe it. You won't fool me. I said, yeah, it's a man.

I got to know Ricardo. Ricardo received Christ in our meetings because we had a ministry who would go out and minister and haul these people who were living in the street, doing that as they're living. And Ricardo would go every day.

Whoever picked him up, he would go in limos with guys coming in from New Jersey. He told me, and he'd always keep razor blades handy in case he had to slash his way out of some situation. Then I learned his story and how he was raped as a kid and how he got involved in all this stuff.

Then he found Jesus, but he had gone for so many years. I think his street name was Sarah or Sarita. And he found Jesus.

He started to talk to me. I said, now listen, this Tuesday, I don't want to see you in a dress again. He said, well, no, that's all I have.

I said, no, we'll get you clothes. You got to dress like a man. God made you a man.

You're going to be a man now. So you're going to be a man of God. I remember the Tuesday.

I see myself now. I can see myself in front of the church. I said, everybody, we got a new convert in the church.

We're going to get him baptized. And his name is Ricardo Aparicio. And he walked forward.

He had a sweatshirt on and pants. And the place went nuts because they knew about him. They had seen him.

Someone would have walked in and said, were they clapping? Don't you get it? He's wearing clothes, men's clothes. They would have said, what are you talking about? Then he got married. Then we rented Madison Square Garden and the choir did a concert and we had some other guests and we had a video about his life.

And he walked up on the platform with his wife and I introduced them to the Madison Square Garden. Packed a couple thousand homeless people that we brought in and gave them little boxes of things they would need, deodorant, soap and whatnot, shelters where they were. Oh my goodness.

No one's too far gone. In fact, sometimes it's the ones who we think our father's gone that come quicker than the ones who are close. Come on.

Isn't that true? Isn't that true? See what God wants to do today is just forgive people. Listen to me. When I was growing up, I never understood when my future father-in-law would say the word grace.

I didn't know what he meant by grace. What's grace? I thought grace was with the prayer you say before you eat. Grace is God's love and action doing for you what you don't deserve.

And what God wants to magnify more than anything in this universe is his grace, which is his love in action. He doesn't want to punish. He doesn't want to hold you back.

He wants to show grace to you. Is there judgment at the end of life? Yeah, Paul's going to talk about that. But right now, here, what God wants to show is grace.

Why in the world would Paul endure beatings and imprisonment? Why would he risk his life if this thing wasn't real and God hadn't shown his grace? For those of you that are doubting about this and that, just explain to me why he would do what he did. And maybe for some of you, it's hard to fight against the goads, isn't it? Whether you've never known the Lord, but you have light, or whether you do know the Lord, but you're walking away from him and you're living a life not pleasing to him and, oh yeah, he's giving you the goad, isn't he? You're cutting yourself inside. Nobody knows that you cover it up, but he's pricking you inside.

Why? Because he loves you. He wants your attention before you go over the abyss. And lastly, it's not only hard for us to fight against the goads, but my goodness, everyone listening to me, what is the thing Jesus has shown that he wants you to do and how he wants you to live? Are you going to turn your back on him and just be a Sunday-go-to-church Christian? I plead with you in the name of Christ.

After all that he's done for you, are you going to sit in this building or some other building and say, I went to church on Sunday? Or are you going to be all in and say, no, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. After what he did for me, I'm all in. Whether I live or whether I die, I'm going to live for Jesus or I'll die for Jesus, but I'm all in for Jesus.

That's Paul. Why? Because I opposed him. Then I met him.

And now, what am I going to do with a love like that? What am I going to do? Turn my back on him and go to church? That's the curse on a good part of this country and around the world now. We've reduced Christianity to going to church rather than I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. He laid his hand on me, and now I'm going to be what he wants me to be.

I'm going to say what he wants me to say. I'm going to get on an airplane and go where he wants me to go. That's the Christianity that so powerfully swept across the Roman Empire.

Listen, you are looking at the frailest man of my mother's three children. She's here. She knows it's the truth.

Both my brother and my sister were nicer people. My brother was half trained to be in the ministry, studied religion at Columbia. While he was studying religion, I was cutting school.

But here I am. Not because I'm worth two cents, but because his grace is amazing. Can we just put our hands together? His grace is amazing.

Close your eyes. If you're here today, and this message has reached you on some level, and you would like one of the pastors to just be moving among you, put our hand on your shoulder, or one of the deacons or deaconesses. Listen, we've been there.

Whatever you're going through, we've been there. We know that. Whatever discouragement, whatever hurt, whatever pain, Jesus is the one.

He's alive. Jesus is the answer, because he's alive. He's not dead.

Pastor, do you understand everything in the Bible? No. Do you understand everything in life? No. But I know one thing.

Jesus is alive. Jesus is alive, and he loves to forgive and give you a fresh beginning. Anyone here who needs a fresh beginning in life or a new beginning in your Christian walk, we don't want to know the details.

Just get out of your seat and come up right to the front right here. Come out of the balcony. Come from downstairs.

Just stand here and say, I want a new beginning. I need a new start, pastor. Just come out of your seat and stand here.

God, thank you for your love today. We're not Saul of Tarsus, but we are Saul of Tarsus. We're lost and undone without God or his son until you reach down your hand for me, Lord.

I thank you for the men and women who have come forward, and whatever their situation is, we confess our sins with them. We put our trust only in Jesus and what he did on the cross. We release ourselves into the loving arms of God, our Savior.

God, wash them, cleanse them, give them a new beginning, change them from the inside out. But let today, this last Sunday in June 2014, be a day they'll never forget as long as they live. No more fighting against the goads.

We surrender to Jesus. We surrender to God and his love and his plan for our lives. Be with us, we pray today.

In the name of Jesus and everyone said, you folks may hug one another.

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