

Sermon for January 25, 2026 – The Conversion of St. Paul

Galatians 1:11-24 EHV

Theme: **Your faith is God's work alone, who**

- 1) Set you apart from birth.
- 2) Called you by His grace.
- 3) Revealed His Son to you through His Gospel.
- 4) Wants you to witness His grace to the world.

¹¹But I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. ¹²For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation from Jesus Christ.

¹³Certainly you have heard of my former way of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God to an extraordinary degree and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my own people, because I was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵However, God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal his Son in me, so that I would preach him among the Gentiles. At that time, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, ¹⁷and I did not go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. Instead I went away into Arabia, and then I returned again to Damascus.

¹⁸Next, after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to meet Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. ¹⁹But I saw none of the other apostles, except James, the Lord's brother. ²⁰(Now about the things I am writing to you—look, I assure you in the presence of God that I am not lying.) ²¹Then I went to the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²²I was still personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. ²³They heard only: "The one who was once persecuting us is now preaching the faith that he once tried to destroy." ²⁴And they were praising God for what happened to me.

Evaluate this statement: "The only reason you believe in Jesus is that you grew up in a Christian home in Canada. If you had grown up in a Muslim home in the Middle East, you would probably be Muslim."

On the surface, that kind of makes sense, doesn't it? Most people do tend to follow the religion and worldview of their family and culture.

But when it comes to faith in Jesus, this statement is actually false. Why? Because it assumes that your faith in Jesus is a human choice shaped by your environment instead of the Holy Spirit's work in you.

Regardless of whether you grew up in Canada or China, in a Christian home or in a home that never mentioned Christ, in the end there is only one reason anyone believes in Jesus.

Today, with the Apostle Paul as our guide, we'll see what that one reason is: **Your faith is God's work alone**, who 1) set you apart at birth, 2) called you by His grace, 3) revealed His Son to you through His Word, and 4) wants you to witness His grace to the world.

Part One: God set you apart at birth.

Our sermon text comes from a letter Paul wrote to Christians in a region called Galatia. These believers were being troubled by false teachers who claimed that Paul made up his teaching about salvation by grace alone. They insisted that real Christians still had to keep the law of Moses in order to be saved.

Paul strongly disagreed. He says:

¹¹But I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. ¹²For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation from Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of Jesus is so unlike every other religion in the world that it can't be man-made. Every other religion says that it's up to you to get yourself right with God and earn His forgiveness. But the Gospel of Jesus proclaims something completely different: that God loved us while we were still sinners and saved us while we were His enemies.ⁱ No human can invent a gospel like that.

And then there is the example of Paul himself. If the Gospel of Jesus were just a human idea, how could anyone explain his conversion? He writes:

¹³Certainly you have heard of my former way of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God to an extraordinary degree and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my own people, because I was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

Paul didn't just accept the religion of his ancestors—he excelled in it, outpacing his peers.ⁱⁱ He was so zealous for his ancestral faith that he actively hunted down Christians. If faith in Jesus were simply the product of upbringing or culture, Paul would never have changed.

But he did change. Why? The apostle Paul tells us.

¹⁵However, God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal his Son in me, so that I would preach him among the Gentiles.

Despite foreseeing all the pain and sorrow Paul would cause His people as a persecutor, God chose to love Paul and set him apart for His gracious purpose – determining the precise time, place, and means by which Paul would come to faith so that he might become His ambassador of divine grace to the world.

And, dear Christian, what God did for Paul, in his own unique way, he has also done for you. Before you were born, God knew you and set you apart to belong to Him. He chose the precise place and time He would reveal Jesus to you through His Gospel to forgive your sins and create faith in your heart.

Part Two: God called you by his grace.

What God planned to do from before creation, He carried out in your life when he called you by his grace.

What is grace? Grace is God's undeserved love. It's a love you and I could never earn and never deserve, yet that God freely expresses for Christ's sake.

The apostle Paul knew this grace well. He once wrote:

Even though formerly I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man. But I was shown mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief. ¹⁴The grace of our Lord overflowed on me along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ⁱⁱⁱ

When did the LORD show Paul this grace? When he was knee-deep in sin, on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians. The LORD appeared to him suddenly, asking Paul why he was persecuting Him.

Can you imagine the terror Paul felt hearing that question? He deserved to be cast into hell forever! But the LORD did not do that. Instead, he showed Paul grace. He forgave all his sins. Why? St. Paul tells us:

¹⁵This saying is trustworthy and worthy of full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶But I was shown mercy for this reason: that in me, the worst sinner, Christ Jesus might demonstrate his unlimited patience as an example for those who are going to believe in him, resulting in eternal life. ^{iv}

The same grace God showed Paul, He has shown to you. For some, that grace came shortly after birth through Baptism. For others, it came later in life through the preaching of the Gospel. Regardless of when or how it happened, the situation was the same: you were sinful and spiritually blind—unable and unwilling to come to God. And yet the Lord loved you. He carried out his plan to save you. Through His Gospel in the written Word and the sacrament of Holy Baptism, God mercifully expressed His grace to you by addressing your sin and revealing His Son to you as your Saviour.

Part Three: God revealed His Son to you through the Gospel.

And what the LORD did for us, He also did for Paul: He revealed His Son to him through the written Word.

But wait – didn't Paul physically see Jesus with his own eyes? Yes, He did. But that is not how Paul came to know Jesus. God revealed his Son to Paul through the pages of Scripture. Paul writes:

At that time, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, ¹⁷and I did not go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. Instead I went away into Arabia.

It seems Paul stayed in the sparsely populated province of Arabia for about two years before going back to Damascus. Why? Sadly, the Bible doesn't say in detail. But from what follows, it's clear that God used that time to ground Paul deeply in His Word.

You see, Paul was a student of the Bible from youth onward. He had even sat at the feet of great teachers like Gamaliel^v. But only now, after Christ appeared to him, did he begin to truly understand those Scriptures. The Holy Spirit opened his eyes to see God's Son on every page.

That is how God reveals Jesus to you as well. Through the pages of the Old and New Testaments alike, the same Spirit who taught Paul teaches you. As your pastor faithfully preaches and teaches God's Word to you, you grow in faith and understanding of Christ – not because your pastor's such a great teacher, but because the Holy Spirit has promised to work through His Word.

Yes, the LORD himself reveals Christ to us through the Gospel. He does this, not only to save you, but to save others through you as He prepares you to be a witness of His grace to the world.

Part Four: God wants you to witness His grace to the world.

Why did God choose, save, and reveal His saving grace to Paul? The Apostle tells us:

So that I would preach him among the Gentiles.

The word "gentiles" simply means "the nations"—all the different peoples of the world.

Because God *wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*,^{vi} the LORD saved Paul to become His ambassador of truth to the nations. And what God desired for Paul, He also desires for you.

No, Jesus did not call you to go off to some foreign land to be His apostle. Instead, He calls you to influence the people that He put into your life with your Christian attitude and behaviour as you speak the truth to them in love.

You might be thinking, "But how can God use someone like me? My past is such a mess. I've sinned so much."

Paul answers that fear by reminding us how God first used him.

²³They heard only: "The one who was once persecuting us is now preaching the faith that he once tried to destroy." ²⁴And they were praising God for what happened to me.

As Paul's life exemplifies, the greatest sinners often make the clearest witnesses of God's grace. That is why God chose you to witness His grace to the people God places in your life, and not His holy angels.

Now, you might also think, "I'm not a good speaker. I don't know the Bible very well. How could I possibly convince anyone to believe in Jesus?"

You don't need to be a theologian or great speaker to share God's grace with others. Remember: faith is God's work alone. All the LORD asks of you is that you faithfully speak of what Jesus has revealed to you in His Word. God Himself will take care of the rest. He promises to work through your loving witness to carry out his saving will.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: thank God for your faith in Jesus as your Saviour. Recognize that this faith is God's work alone. From before your birth, he set you apart in Christ. In time, he called you by his grace and revealed his Son to you through the Gospel.

Why did He do all this? Simply because He loves you.

In the peace of that forgiving love, He now sends you to witness His grace to the world—to show Christ's love, and to tell others what he has revealed to you in His Word, so that they too may be saved. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Romans 5:8,10

ⁱⁱ Cf. Philippians 3:4-6

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Timothy 1:13-14

^{iv} 1 Timothy 1:15-16

^v Cf. Acts 22:3

^{vi} 1 Timothy 2:4