

Worst to First

1 Timothy 1:12-16

December 23, 2020

In 1990 I was a sophomore in high school. I had mediocre grades, I couldn't drive yet, and my favorite baseball team finished dead last in their division. Even though I grew up in Ohio, since my parents were from Minnesota, I had always been a die-hard Twins fan. At the end of the 1990 season the Minnesota Twins finished last in the American League West with a 74-88 record, a whopping 29 games out of first place. The funny thing is, in 1990 the Cincinnati Reds—a team from Ohio—ended up winning the World Series.

But things turned around significantly the following school year. As a junior, I finished with all A's and one B, I got my driver's licence, I met the girl who I would eventually marry seven years later, and the Minnesota Twins went from worst to first. That fall, the Twins improved to a 95-67 record and became World Series champions thanks to Kirby, Herbie, and World Series MVP Jack Morris. I still have my Homer Hanky and my '91 Twins Wheaties box.

Everybody loves a worst-to-first story. Everyone, that is, except for the Atlanta Braves, who ironically, also went from worst to first between the 1990 and 1991 seasons, and ended up losing the World Series to the Twins. But everyone else loves a good worst-to-first story.

That's also what our favorite Christmas stories are all about. The Grinch, who at first, hated the whole Christmas season, had a massive change of heart and became the guest of honor at the Who Christmas dinner, himself carving the roast beast.

Has anyone watched a retelling of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* this month? I prefer the version with Patrick Stewart (of Star Trek fame), second only to *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. Ebenezer Scrooge is the epitome of a worst-to-first conversion. In just one magical night, Scrooge's whole outlook on Christmas was transformed from "Bah! Humbug!" to "Merry Christmas!"

Tonight, I want to tell you about another one of these worst-to-first stories. It's a story that has nothing to do with baseball, and although it's technically not a Christmas story, it is a story that has everything to do with Christmas.

Within a few years of the first Christmas and the birth of Jesus in the little town of Bethlehem, another Jewish family living in the city of Tarsus welcomed their own baby boy into the world. Like Jesus—and just about everybody else born in the first-century—we know almost nothing about the early years of the man known as the Apostle Paul. We do know that Paul was responsible for writing a major chunk of the New Testament. If there were a Mount Rushmore of Bible heroes, the Apostle Paul would likely be one of the faces carved into the side of the mountain.

But there was a time in Paul's life when he wanted nothing to do with Christianity. During the earliest days of the church, Paul hated with a passion Jesus's followers and their new religion. His dislike for all things Christian would have made Scrooge and the Grinch look like wimps. It wasn't that he was anti-religion. Paul was a well-respected Jewish scholar and teacher and he loved God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. Yet, he was convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was more of a cult leader than Christ. Paul believed that the stories about Jesus were false, and that the message of the gospel that Christians were proclaiming in Jerusalem was a bunch of lies.

Here at E-Free Bemidji, we've been working our way through the New Testament book of Acts in recent months. We've paused that sermon series for the Christmas season, but eventually, when we return to Acts, we will get the details of Paul's conversion story. I don't want to steal any of Pastor Jerry's thunder, but spoiler alert, Paul the passionate persecutor of Christians would one day become Paul the passionate preacher of the gospel. Paul's story is a worst-to-first story.

Tradition tells us that the Apostle Paul was likely around 60 years old when he was executed for his faith. Very near the time of his death, Paul wrote a couple of letters to a friend and fellow ministry partner named Timothy. Both of these letters are included in our New Testaments today, and in the first of these two letters, Paul shared with his friend a little of his worst-to-first story. In Christian circles we tend to call these stories of coming to faith testimonies.

Listen to how Paul gives his testimony and how he expresses his thanks to God for the amazing grace that was shown to him:

“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I

was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 1:12-14, NIV).

Even though he was a deeply religious man, because of his hostile opposition to Jesus, Paul described himself as a blasphemer. His hostility toward Christianity boiled over to the point of persecuting those who confessed to be followers of Jesus Christ. In another of Paul’s New Testament letters, he described his passion for persecuting Christians as arising from a zealous spirit. He believed that stamping out the Christian faith was his religious duty. Paul’s zeal even led him to justify violence. The Bible describes one occasion when Paul coldly stood on the sidelines while watching the public execution of a Christian named Stephen.

If Christianity was true, and if Jesus really was who he claimed to be, then Paul’s former way of life was equivalent to spitting in the face of God while believing in his heart that his actions were a pleasing act of worship. The last thing a misguided religious zealot deserves from God is mercy. But that’s exactly what Paul the passionate persecutor received from the Lord Jesus. He received mercy.

Writing to his friend Timothy, Paul reflected on the radical transformation that took place in his heart because of the overabundance of God’s grace poured out on him through Jesus Christ. If the Grinch’s total transformation caused his heart to grow three sizes in one day, then Paul’s heart must have grown by a factor of three thousand. His conversion was no mere change of religious affiliation. In fact, Paul knew that this radical reversal was something that only God could have done.

I mentioned earlier that while Paul’s story is technically not a Christmas story, this story has everything to do with Christmas. The whole point of Paul’s personal testimony was not just show us what God did for him. Paul’s story was meant to show what Jesus Christ can do for each one of us.

Paul continued in his letter to Timothy and said,

“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners,

Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:15-16, NIV).

No, there’s no mention here of shepherds and angels, of Magi and mangers, of Mary and Joseph, or of an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes. But what Paul says here about Jesus may very well be one of the best summary statements about Christmas in all of the Bible:

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

Isn’t that how the Christmas story begins?

“This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:18-21, NIV).

Perhaps Paul was a little too hard on himself, claiming that he was the “worst of sinners.” We know that history has produced some pretty wicked characters, and it might be hard to know just where Paul should rank on such a list.

It might be hard to know where each of us ranks on that list. There may be days when it’s just too hard to get out of bed because of the way we feel about ourselves. Our failures would put us right there with Paul in the Sinners Hall of Fame. And yet there are also days when, at least in comparison with the rest of the world’s losers, we’re not doing all that bad.

But please don’t miss the point. Wherever we think we land on a list like this, none of us deserve the goodness of God. And certainly none of us deserve his mercy and grace. Unlike Santa’s list, according to God’s holy standard, we’re all naughty. But Paul’s story isn’t meant to make us feel like garbage as we look

inward at the various ways that we rebel against God. No, Paul's story is meant to show us that God's Christmas gift to the world is a gift filled with an overabundance of his mercy and grace.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Jesus came to live the life that each one of us should have lived. Jesus fully obeyed God his Father. And Jesus went to the cross on our behalf. He died the death that each one of us should have died. He took upon himself the just punishment for that was due to each one of us. And while none of us deserves such a Christmas gift, none of us is so far from God that he can't lavish this gift upon us. Paul's worst-to-first story is meant to show us that when God sent his Son into the world, he sent him to save us from our sins.

God wants each of our stories to be worst-to-first stories. But unlike a baseball team, we can't simply resolve to play better next season. Our record is so bad that we are a billion games out of first place with no hope of ever reaching the top on our own. And yet we do have hope. The good news of Christmas is that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He came to rescue the worst of sinners, sinners like Paul and like you and me.

Over the next couple of days, I hope that you will find many ways to celebrate the joy of Christmas. It is so good to be able to celebrate Christmas together here tonight. And we are so thankful for the technology we have to serve all of you watching on the livestream. But please don't let this Christmas pass you by without pausing to consider God's amazing grace, his abundant mercy, and the wonders of his love for you.

“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:15-16, NIV).