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**DAILY  
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CEDARCREEKCHURCH

# When to Say the Unexpected Yes

What is the most unexpected gift you've ever received? Was it some incredible Christmas present you had not asked for? That engagement ring? An extension on a paper? All of us have at some point in our lives received an unexpected gift. It doesn't matter what kind of gift it was, we remember it because it impacted us. Everything about the Christmas (or Advent) season is supposed to help us wait on God. The Jews of the first century were waiting on the Messiah, but probably didn't expect him to come the way that he did – as a vulnerable baby born to a virgin in a manger. We know this story, and know that Jesus did come, so it's difficult for us to put ourselves in the position of these people. However, we also know that Jesus will one day come back, and he has called us to be prepared – to wait – for that day (Luke 12:35-40). We don't know when that day will come, so what are we supposed to do right now?

Lead Pastor Ben Snyder addressed this question this past weekend by walking through the story of the Apostle Paul. Originally named Saul, Paul was an enemy of the Christian faith. He approved the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Acts 8:1), and was on a mission to arrest the followers of Christ before he was eventually converted by Jesus (Acts 9:1-9). Paul eventually became arguably the second most important figure in Christian history, writing roughly half of the New Testament.

Through his conversion story we learn a few things. Primarily, we learn that to be surprised by God, we need to give and receive the unexpected "yes." Saul would have been the most unlikely choice to become the Apostle Paul we know today, yet God unexpectedly showed up in all his glory to invite one of the greatest enemies of the church to become one of its greatest leaders. Paul could have said no (in fact, that would have been expected), but he didn't. Instead, he gave the unexpected "yes" and became a follower of Christ.

In this interaction, Paul was blinded and needed assistance. God called on a man named Ananias to assist him. Ananias had heard of Paul and was obviously a bit hesitant in helping the man he thought was out to imprison him. Imagine being in Ananias' shoes. Would you blame him for saying no? After all, Paul was a fierce enemy of the church. But instead of saying no, Ananias chose to obey God's call. This, though a small portion of the story of our church, turned out to be a very pivotal decision.

**What unexpected opportunities has God laid before you? To whom in your life do you need to offer unexpected help?** When we reflect on the unexpected parts of Paul's story, it's hard for us to say no to those we might be able to help

### *Acts 9:1-19*

*<sup>1</sup>Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. <sup>2</sup>He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains. <sup>3</sup>As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. <sup>4</sup>He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" <sup>5</sup>"Who are you, lord?" Saul asked. And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!" <sup>6</sup>Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." <sup>7</sup>The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice but saw no one! <sup>8</sup>Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. <sup>9</sup>He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink. <sup>10</sup>Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord!" he replied. <sup>11</sup>The Lord said, "Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now. <sup>12</sup>I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so he can see again." <sup>13</sup>"But Lord," exclaimed Ananias, "I've heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! <sup>14</sup>And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name." <sup>15</sup>But the Lord said, "Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. <sup>16</sup>And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake." <sup>17</sup>So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." <sup>18</sup>Instantly something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. <sup>19</sup>Afterward he ate some food and regained his strength.*

### **Prayer**

*God, thank you for saying yes to me. Thank you for offering your amazing grace to me despite my sin. I know that you have given me the greatest unexpected and undeserved gift, and I want your help in sharing that gift with others. Help me to say yes to blessing others, in Jesus' name. Amen.*

*\*\*This post was written by Andy Rectenwald. Andy is the Director of the LivingItOut Bible Study. He has a passion for bringing the Bible to life for people and for Christian Apologetics. He is married and has a beautiful little girl. You can follow him on twitter at @andyrectenwald*

# Do You Have a Bad Reputation?

In Acts chapter 9, we see a powerful example of transformation. Saul was an unlikely candidate for God's grace. Not only did Saul not believe in Jesus, he devoted his life to hunting down Christians and bringing them to "justice." Saul's reputation was widely known, and feared. But we see in Acts that immediately following Saul's life-changing encounter with God, he starts preaching the good news to Jews. Saul does not spend weeks or months defending his previous actions or trying to change his reputation. The message is immediately focused on God.

Saul was a Pharisee, a religious leader. As such, he was intimately familiar with the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah. Once Saul accepted that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, he understood better than most the promises that were waiting for him: The promise of redemption and eternal life in heaven. Even after his conversion, Saul was still waiting for these promises to be fulfilled. But he was actively waiting. He was spreading the message of Jesus the Messiah to anyone who would listen. He was risking his life, his safety, his reputation, and all of the things that were important to him.

If God can transform someone as unexpected as a Pharisee trying to persecute Christians, why is it so hard to believe that God can overlook your baggage and offer the same forgiveness, grace, and salvation to you? It's easy to read stories in the Bible and think, "how nice for them." But do you believe the same change and transformation can happen to you? Romans 3:23 tells us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." There are no qualifiers, no exceptions. We are all equally sinful, we are all equally guilty. The good news is that God's business is forgiving sinners.

Perhaps you've already accepted Jesus as your Savior, your Messiah. How are you waiting for his return? Are you hiding because of your baggage or reputation? Or are you living for God and spreading the good news? Let Saul be an inspiration to you. Let his example show you how to stop trying to defend yourself, or hide from your reputation, and instead focus on God's message. Stop worrying, stop delaying, and start waiting by doing!

## **Acts 9:19b-22**

***<sup>19b</sup>Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days. <sup>20</sup>And immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is indeed the Son of God!"***

***<sup>21</sup>All who heard him were amazed. “Isn’t this the same man who caused such devastation among Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem?” they asked. “And didn’t he come here to arrest them and take them in chains to the leading priests?”***

***<sup>22</sup>Saul’s preaching became more and more powerful, and the Jews in Damascus couldn’t refute his proofs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.***

What is most surprising about Saul’s actions in these verses?

We all have baggage in our lives – past experiences and decisions that have shaped us both positively and negatively. How can you overlook someone’s baggage and see them how God’s sees them?

How can Saul’s story inspire you to act today? List one or two changes you’re going to make.

### **Prayer**

*God, thank you for loving us, baggage and all. Thank you for your grace and your salvation even though we don’t deserve it. Help us to see others as you see them. Help us to share your good news. Amen.*

*\*\*This post was written by Kaye Althaus. Kaye loves being a part of the LivingItOut Bible Study writing team. In her spare time she loves to read and do crafts with friends. She and her husband live in the quiet country and raise chickens.*

# If You're Not Dead, You're Not Done

Life is full of choices. And the choices we make affect our lives in various ways – some miniscule and others far more complex. Those same choices also contribute to making us who we are.

Have you ever encountered a choice that perplexed you? Something that you had to spend a lot of time contemplating? Paul made one of the most profound statements in Philippians 1:21, “for to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better.”

Here, he is saying that being with Jesus was the greatest thing that he could imagine. But, he also believed that while he was here on earth, living for Christ was far better than anything that the world could offer.

He had two warring desires: to live for Christ here on Earth, and to be with him in eternity. Paul, didn't care where he was; he was focused on Christ no matter what. He was sold out for Jesus. Paul's real desire was to be used by God, for his purpose. His sole reason to stay on earth was to have an opportunity to share Christ with others and take part in the grace, splendor, and glory that can only come from living a life devoted to Christ.

Too often, we tend to focus on our own problems or circumstances. We try to force things by taking matters into our own hands. If our situations aren't moving fast enough, we do things to bring about rapid change. Sometimes, this just results in us spinning our wheels, or bringing more destruction and chaos to our lives.

Ironically, the same could be said for those of us who *don't* take action. We sit back and use God as an excuse for our situation. God is telling us to move, and we let fear, uncertainty, and other people talk us out of what is prepared for us.

Paul is telling us that there is a plan; while we are here, we should focus on Christ and the opportunities and experiences that he has for us. We are also to focus on things above (Colossians 3:2). When he moves, we move; when he stops, we stop; when he is silent, we wait in anticipation (Psalm 27:14).

It will be much better for us in heaven, but there is work for us to do while we are here. We need to be like Paul, embrace this life, and live it for Christ. After all, if we're not living it for him, then what are we living for?

### **Philippians 1:21-24**

***<sup>21</sup>For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. <sup>22</sup>But if I live, I can do more fruitful work for Christ. So I really don't know which is better. <sup>23</sup>I'm torn between two desires: I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me. <sup>24</sup>But for your sakes, it is better that I continue to live.***

We should use Paul's example of complete abandon to God's will as a catalyst in our own lives.

What work has God prepared for you? Do you need to allow him to move and work, or do you need to slow down and wait for him?

### **Prayer**

*Lord, you are perfect, and you know everything about me. Increase my desire to be completely sold out for you. Return to me the joy of your salvation. I ask that you teach me to wait on you and to fulfill the work that you have prepared for me. Amen.*

*\*\*This post was written by Stephen Dull. Stephen is a Continuous Improvement Engineer, Triathlete, and Blogger. He is passionate about Faith, Finances, Fitness, and helping men to discover their God-given dream. He has a lovely wife and 2 beautiful daughters. You can follow him on twitter at @MaxxDull or on his website: [www.the360manproject.com](http://www.the360manproject.com)*

# Pain for the Sake of Christ

Arrested. Beaten. Shipwrecked. Imprisoned. It is unlikely that we will endure the hardships Paul went through while proclaiming his belief in Christ, but he was more than willing to suffer during his life for the eternal reward that would come in his death. Paul wrote in Philippians 1:21, “For to me, living means living for Christ and dying is even better.” He also counted it as a joy to suffer in the name of Christ.

We often associate waiting with suffering. Throughout the Bible, we are instructed to “wait for God” and to “be patient until the Lord’s coming.” But our culture screams instant gratification, especially this time of year, with Black Friday sales, Christmas lists, and advertisements convincing us we need a new car or television or Lego set.

Waiting is hard, but it is our greatest gift that awaits in heaven as Jesus has already paid the price to buy our salvation. For Paul, waiting for Jesus was physically painful, as he experienced far worse than we will likely have to endure. Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 just some of the suffering he endured – all in the name of Jesus. He was whipped, lashed, stoned, and left for dead on countless occasions.

Our waiting probably won’t be as outwardly painful as it was for Paul, but it can still be physically painful. Everyone experiences stress, but when it ascends to the level of anxiety, it hurts. Anxiety-related disorders affect 40 million Americans each year. When I am waiting, I let my mind wander, considering all possible outcomes (the worst ones usually rise to the surface). My imagination runs wild but tends to assume the result will end with my feeling more like Paul – confused, beaten up, and lost at sea. Fortunately, the gospel proclaims a promise of hope, that even in death, we receive a reward far greater than what we could hope for. When we die, we gain. For now, we wait. But we do not have to wait to die to receive this gift. We can enjoy it right now!

## **2 Corinthians 11:23-28**

***<sup>23</sup>Are they servants of Christ? I know I sound like a madman, but I have served him far more! I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. <sup>24</sup>Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. <sup>25</sup>Three times I***



***was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. <sup>26</sup>I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. <sup>27</sup>I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. <sup>28</sup>Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches.***

Look back on the difficult times in your life, or a time when you had to wait for something. How did you feel then, and what is your perspective on it now? Are you able to see how God worked through that situation?

While we may not face beatings or imprisonment for our belief in Christ, we will face hardships and times of trial. Find encouragement in the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 6 when he tells us not to worry but to seek God first, promising that when we do this, God will provide everything we need.

## **Prayer**

*God, I will seek you and your righteousness above all else. Even in the waiting, I will trust in you. Do not let me be anxious about anything as I present my requests to you with prayer and thanksgiving. Amen.*

*\*\*This post was written by Ryan Cook. Ryan is the business director at Chick-Fil-A in Toledo. He enjoys spending time with his wife, son and daughter, and watching Cleveland sports as much as anyone can. Follow him on twitter at @CookfilA*

# The Hope of Christmas

As I was getting out our Christmas decorations this year, I came across a picture of my grandmother. I have fond memories of spending the night at her house as a young child. The evenings started with tasty dinners followed by front porch rocking, a tour of her rose garden, and often a roll down the hill in her backyard. They always ended with me listening to her read Bible stories. My favorite story was of the birth of baby Jesus. I hope my grandchildren will have fond memories of me telling them the very same story.

The Christmas story has been told again and again, for more than 2,000 years. Think about how the story perpetuated and how it continues to live today. At the time of its first telling, there were no tweets between shepherds, no GPS for the traveling wise men, no coverage of the birth in the local press, nor videos of Gabriel appearing to Mary. And although the coming of Jesus had been prophesied, it is a miracle that the story spread amongst believers and is still alive today. The magical story of Christmas sets the stage for Jesus' ministry. It leads to his brutal death, but gives us the hope in the resurrection. The Good News is that forgiveness and eternal life are a gift of God's grace received through faith in Christ and available to all people.

No person, apart from Jesus himself, shaped the history of Christianity like the Apostle Paul. Even before he was a believer, his actions were significant. His frenzied persecution of Christians got the church started in obeying Christ's final command to take the gospel worldwide. Paul's personal encounter with Jesus changed his life. He never lost his fierce intensity, but from that point onward, it was channeled for the gospel. God transformed Paul from a persecutor of Christians to a preacher for Christ. Paul's letters to various churches became part of the New Testament!

Paul was commissioned to spread the message. But he didn't get to see it completely fulfilled. Neither will we; at least it's not likely on this side of heaven! We are all waiting on Jesus. In the meantime, we are sharing this message with the world. Our mission is to pass on what's "most important." And there is no other message in the world more important than the gospel.

As we prepare to pass on the greatest story ever told, remember that Advent is a season of waiting. The first century Jewish people were awaiting the arrival of their savior. For us, we are waiting for the second coming of Christ. God does not

waste our time; he will use our past and present so we may serve him with our future!

### ***1 Corinthians 15:3-8***

***<sup>3</sup>I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. <sup>4</sup>He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. <sup>5</sup>He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. <sup>6</sup>After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. <sup>7</sup>Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. <sup>8</sup>Last of all, as though I had been born at the wrong time, I also saw him.***

Are you willing to let God use you as he did Paul?

What struggles in your life has God used to prepare you for the future?

What is God doing in your life to change you like he did Paul?

### **Prayer**

*Lord, prepare me so that I can serve you. Use my past and present so that I may serve you in the future! Help me to spread your Good News. Amen.*

*\*\*This post was written by Pam Haynam. Pam is a regular contributor to the LivingItOut Daily Bible Study, a Lead Mentor Mom for Momentum, and a cook for the weekend worship band. She has a passion for education, has served on a public school board, and serves on a charter school board. She is married with three children and two grandsons.\*\**