

“Beautifully Broken – Wreckage to Witness”

May 25, 2025 — Selby United Church – Scripture 1 Timothy 1:12-16

By Rebecca Stacey

over, and his sentence is clear: soon, he will be executed. Yet, as he shares with Timothy what will be his final letter, his tone is not one of despair, but one of confidence in his redemption: **“For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”** 2 Timothy 4:6-8

Paul is not defeated. He has poured out his life for the gospel, like a drink offering. A drink offering was a practice in the Old Testament where wine was poured out before God as a symbol of complete surrender and worship. Nothing held back.

Paul sees his life in the same way: offered fully to God, not wasted, but given. And now, as his earthly journey ends, he looks ahead to the eternal reward waiting for him. His words aren't just a farewell—they are an encouragement and a challenge to us. Will we fight the good fight? Will we keep the faith?

Paul's legacy is transformational. The man who once hunted Christians became one of Christianity's greatest advocates. The story began with vengeance but ends with victory—not the kind the world gives, but the kind only grace can offer. As his journey neared its end, he left us with this final encouragement: **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”** 2 Timothy 4:7

Paul *remained faithful* to his calling. And because of that, he looked forward to the *crown of righteousness*—not a reward for his own goodness, but a gift from the Saviour who had met him on that road to Damascus.

Many years ago, I walked into a hospital room. The family had been called in, my Nana didn't have much time left. I gave her a hug and held her hand. She smiled and said, “I'm

going to the Holy Land.” There was no doubt, no fear, no regret – just confidence and anticipation. Whenever I read the Apostle Paul's words, I think of her. That smile, that peace, that blessed assurance... **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” ... And now I'm going home.**

It's interesting to note that Paul chose race imagery for his letter at a time when the Olympic Games were widely known in the Greco-Roman world as a symbol of endurance, discipline, and finishing well. Emperor Nero competed in the games, often rigging events to ensure his own victory. In contrast, Paul's encourages us to fight the good fight, finish the race, and press on toward the eternal prize – running the race as we are called, but knowing we are never running alone.

Where are you in the race of life? Maybe you're still on the road, blinded by regret. Or you're in the quiet valley, searching for clarity. Maybe, like Ananias, you're scared or hesitant—but know that you are being called to extend grace.

Paul's story reminds us that God doesn't just forgive—He transforms, redirects, and sends. He takes our past, our passion, even our mistakes, and uses them for His glory.

And He invites us to do the same: to share our story, not because it's perfect, but because it's real. Someone in your life may be waiting—not for a sermon, but for a conversation. Not for answers, but for a welcome. Don't underestimate the Spirit's nudge. Your redemption story is a testimony of God's grace, and through it, others may find hope.

May we be friends and allies in faith, a church that opens wide our doors and our hearts—not just telling others about Jesus but showing them what His redeeming love looks like in us. Thanks be to God for His redeeming love.

Amen

Before becoming the Apostle Paul, one of the founders of the early church, a great champion for Christ and a martyr for the Kingdom of God, he was Saul of Tarsus.

Saul was the perfect Pharisee. He knew the law and practiced the law; by all accounts, he would have been the model religious leader.

We understand him to be a passionate man. He wasn't just a religious man; he was a man on a mission. He was fiercely loyal to the traditions of his ancestors and saw the followers of Jesus not just as a nuisance, but as an insult to everything he believed sacred. He was convinced his actions defended God's honour.

After all, how could his people turn their backs on the true God of Israel to embrace this Jesus fellow: a man who seemingly ignored the laws and lived with the delusion that he could forgive sins! It was also rumoured that he had risen from the dead and had subsequently been seen by his followers. To Saul, it was *preposterous. It was blasphemous. And he wasn't going to stand for it.*

Saul was a man of action. He didn't hesitate, and so he started persecuting Christians. He had them arrested, imprisoned, and gave his nod of approval for stoning.

The early followers of Jesus, known as *The Way*, were small, close-knit Christian communities that often met in secret. They shared the gospel not through large public events, but by personal testimony, acts of generosity, and underground gatherings where they worshipped, prayed, and broke bread together.

It must have been a beautiful sight—the infancy of the church—especially for those sharing firsthand accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

I think it's worth noting every now and then

how the church took root and grew. The fellowship and community that was shared as believers gathered to worship God, and to love and support one another – this should always be our goal.

Sadly, as the early church grew, so did its opposition. Saul was fiercely defending his faith and saw the followers of Jesus as a threat that must be stopped.

This intense persecution pushed many believers from Jerusalem, so Saul set his sights and his mission beyond the city. He gained official approval from the high priest and embarked on a journey to Damascus to find and imprison anyone who *followed* Jesus.

“Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.” Acts 9:1-2

At this time, Damascus was a key city in the Roman Empire, located 240 km north of Jerusalem, in the region of Syria. It was an important cultural, commercial, and religious center, with a sizable Jewish population. This made it a strategic place for Saul's mission to arrest Christians who had fled Jerusalem and were now spreading the message of Jesus.

The passage tells us Saul was authorized to arrest both men and women who belonged to The Way. Nowadays, it might not seem significant to point out that both men and women were being arrested, but at that time, it was. Women were often seen as having little public influence, yet their involvement in sharing the gospel was so impactful that it drew the attention—and opposition—of the authorities. This reminds us that from the very beginning, God's message of redemption is for everyone, and that everyone can play a

vital role in sharing the faith.

So, with letters in hand, Saul continues in his conquest to arrest anyone that was part of *The Way*, to drag them back to Jerusalem, and to ensure they faced punishment. But what Saul didn't know was that on this very journey, his life was about to be completely turned upside down. In one blinding moment, everything was about to change! God was about to redirect Saul's intense passion for His purpose.

"As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 'Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'" Acts 9:3-6

It's almost too overwhelming to imagine, isn't it? To be so sure, so confident, so zealous! And then so abruptly challenged! **An encounter with Jesus has a way of changing someone's life, doesn't it?**

Notice the words that Jesus uses. Not, *"Why are you harassing my people?"*—but *"Why are you persecuting me?"* In that moment, Saul realized that an attack on the followers of Jesus was considered an attack on Christ Himself. Every act of violence and persecution was personal to Jesus. Encountering Jesus changed everything. All along, Saul thought he was fighting for God. Instead, he realized he'd been fighting against Him.

After Saul's encounter with the blinding light and the voice of Jesus, he was blind. His companions, who had seen the light but didn't understand what had just happened, had to lead him by the hand to Damascus. For three days, Saul remained without sight.

I'm sure it was a long three days. In our modern world, it's easy to allow a variety of

distractions to pull us away from guilt or deep contemplation. There was no escaping Saul's mind during this time. It was three days, replaying what had just happened and the events leading up to that moment. The persecution, the vengeance, the passion, the pursuit, the blinding light, the encounter, the darkness...

Meanwhile, in Damascus, a disciple named Ananias received a vision from God, instructing him to go to Saul, a man who was praying. **"The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.'"** But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem, and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." **But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel"** ~ Acts 9:11-15

Obviously, Ananias wasn't thrilled with this mission. However, he trusted and obeyed, going to Saul, he laid his hands on him, and prayed for him. **"So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength."** – Acts 9:17-19

What followed was a complete turnaround! Saul was baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit, and his physical strength returned. He then began to preach boldly in the synagogues that Jesus was the Messiah.

This wasn't a man who slowly came to faith over time. This was God reaching in and choosing Saul, even in the middle of his sin, for a mission far greater than he could imagine.

Remember God's words to Ananias: ***"This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles"*** Acts 9:15. God didn't just *forgive* Saul, He *commissioned* him. He didn't just wipe away his past—He redeemed it. The same passion that once fueled persecution now fueled proclamation!

Saul's dramatic transformation stunned the people of Damascus! They knew him as the early church's fiercest enemy. His passionate preaching bewildered Jewish leaders! As his boldness in faith grew, so did his opposition—forcing him to flee to Arabia, where it is suggested, he spent time to deepen his understanding of the gospel.

Later, returning to Jerusalem, Saul faced skepticism. It can be hard to escape your past, to go from wreckage to witness. But one friend in faith, Barnabas, stood by him, vouching for his transformation. *This support shows the power of having a friend and ally in our redemption stories. But we will have to save that conversation for later!*

Regardless, conflict continued, and for his safety, Saul was sent to Tarsus. Later, his ministry began to truly flourish when he began his missionary journeys. He used the Greek/Roman version of his name, Paul, to more easily connect with his gentile audience. Despite relentless opposition, Paul remained steadfast.

Eventually, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem but exercised his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar. He was then taken to Rome, where—even under house arrest—he continued to preach. Remember relentless Saul, by God's grace, is equally passionate Paul. Nothing could stop him. He was a man with a mission, ordained by God Himself.

As part of his ministry, Paul wrote many letters, which became foundational to

Christian life. His teachings on grace, faith, and church unity have had a lasting impact. Despite suffering, Paul's radical transformation and tireless commitment to spreading the gospel have left a legacy that continues to influence the church to this day.

In short, Paul's ministry proclaimed *salvation by grace*. In one of his letters from prison, Paul reminds us... ***"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."*** Ephesians 2:8

Paul's life and ministry are indeed a redemption story. It's an incredible journey, and there's too much to cover in one sermon. We could spend weeks exploring his life as he lived out these words that he shared from a prison cell, ***"Whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ."*** Philippians 3:7

Paul, a once great figure in his community considered his former life and status worthless, in comparison to the rich life he has in Christ.

With our remaining time today, we are going to fast forward through years of hardship, ministry, and imprisonment, to find Paul writing once again, from a Roman cell, near the end of his life. Imagine Paul—once the bold, tireless missionary who travelled across the Roman world—now sitting in a cold, dark prison cell. This isn't the house arrest of years past, where he could receive visitors freely. This is a Roman dungeon, the final stop for prisoners awaiting execution.

Outside the prison walls, Emperor Nero's persecution rages. After the Great Fire of Rome, Christians became scapegoats, accused of crimes they didn't commit. Across the city, believers are being arrested, tortured, and killed. Fear grips the Christian community, and many have abandoned Paul, not wanting to share his fate.

These were frightening times, but Paul isn't afraid. He knows his time is near. His trial is