

Surprised By God!

Acts 9:1-6

INTRO:

C.S. Lewis wrote a book called Surprised By Joy that is the story of his intellectual development, and the tale of his coming to the Christian faith. A story haunted by the possibility that the two might conflict fatally. Lewis's pursuit of Joy turns out to be the thread that holds his **intellect** and his **faith** together. First he pursues Joy with his intellect. The middle section of the book traces Lewis's education and his delight in finding so many books that speak directly to his longing for Joy. His arrival at faith and the source of Joy track nicely with our text today.

What was the Joy Lewis was seeking?

Lewis' purpose in writing was more than historical. He wanted to identify and describe the events surrounding his accidental discovery of and following search for what he labeled "**Joy**", his translation of the German idea of longing (Sehnsucht). This Joy was so intense for something so good and so high up it could not be explained with words. He is struck with "**stabs of joy**" throughout his life.

The Bible says that God comes to us; we don't come to God.

And when God comes to us we are changed. Our transformation is not something that we do; it is the miraculous turnaround that God works in us, in spite of us. The word “**conversion**” is about when God’s love comes to us, when we become **vividly aware** of that love and are **transformed** by it.

ME:

I remember times when God’s love came to me and caused me to began to transform. I could not name them or describe them, words would fail. They were surely not as vivid as we will see in Acts in a moment, but they don’t need to be. When God comes it is tailored to our need and overpowers our **dullness** and our **settledness**. It is then that we are Surprised by God.

YOU:

Can you think of times when God Suprised you? Don’t put it to words, don't describe the times, they were meant for you. They may inspire another to open their heart to God, but God will surprise them as they have need.

Let’s see how God Surprised the enemy of the Church. When God surprises us we are changed. Watch this:

[Let’s open our hearts to be surprised by God...](#)

GOD:

Acts 9:1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5 He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 8 Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

WE:

This is the story of Saul's conversion to Paul. Paul is called to be a missionary to the Gentiles. Being **called** by God is being **transformed** by God — like Saul becoming Paul. A story of movement from being "**church enemy number one**" to the great leader of the church's mission to the world. A story of what happens when God surprises us.

We think that we are the result of what **we** have managed to make of our lives. The Bible teaches that who we are is not what **we** put together for

ourselves but what God puts together in us in God's search for us. We meet Saul as a persecutor of the church. And on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, Jesus recruits him as the great missionary to the Gentiles. This **persecutor** becomes the **preacher** bringing the Christian faith into the Roman Empire. **Transformation!** **And from where did that dramatic change come?**

Paul's transformation reminds me of the transformation of C. S. Lewis. He wasn't really searching for anything in his life at the time when God closed in on him. Lewis exclaimed with surprise, "**So, it was you all along.**" He didn't find a new life; a new life found him. he didn't find the Joy he sought, the Joy found him.

Lewis said:

How did I get here? How did I come to possess the self that now possesses me?

"It all began in a small town in South Carolina. I was born to two loving, but often inept parents, and raised in a middle-class environment plagued by racial segregation that even at an early age I began to question."

See? We describe ourselves as mostly self-contrived. Our lives are the result of various developments that occur within us.

When you study C. S. Lewis's self as it developed from not much of a believer to a believer in some vague "**theism**" to the robustly orthodox

“**Christian**” who forever impacted the world with his writings, you will be disappointed. Lewis’s biography doesn't help. Lewis grew up negative about Christian faith saying, “**We were offered dry husks of Christianity.**” The main point of Protestantism in Northern Ireland was to show that whatever it was that they believed in was not what Roman Catholics believed. College, army, the war for Lewis—all were negative experiences of Christianity.

He read G. K. Chesterton and concluded that “**Christianity was very sensible— apart from its being Christianity.**” As a young scholar he knew that the Gospels were *ahistorical nonsense*. *Yet in rereading the Gospels he felt that they were so appallingly unimaginative and artless that they must be historical fact!* They certainly weren’t great literature. Then, as if out of nowhere, Lewis wrote, “**I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ.**” He received communion at the church in Heddington for the first time since boyhood. **Where did this come from?** In the most famous passage of Surprised by Joy he writes:

“Picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared came upon me. . . . I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”

This may be why Lewis made Surprised by Joy nonautobiographical. This disappointed some critics. From out of **nowhere** comes this dramatic turn toward faith. There is nothing in the earlier life of Lewis that leads to this, and there's nothing in his biography that accounts for his conversion. Lewis wants to make clear that his "**self**" in Christ was not the result of earlier influences, or some intense intellectual search; *it was a divine gift*. It was from outside of him, transforming him in unintended ways. Lewis' great moment of spiritual insight came as he rode sidecar to Whip-snade Zoo in September of 1931. The strangest of situations for a religious conversion — scholarly C. S. Lewis, bobbing along in a motorcycle sidecar on his way to a second-rate zoo. At least Paul was on a road going somewhere to do important business. Yet Lewis wrote, "**When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did.**" **That's it?** This is tedious spiritual stuff, *even for an English professor!*

The self became something we create through our smart decisions and choices. "**I choose, therefore I am.**" Lewis illustrates a very different idea of the self:

the self as a surprising gift of a creative God.

Christians believe that there is no "**self**" there until God makes a move, until the surprise. Of course, we are modern women and men who have had years of education designed to insulate us from even considering the pos-

sibility that something's happening other than that of our own design. We do not expect to be addressed by voices other than our own. So the story of C. S. Lewis — who wasn't searching for anything, whom God surprised by joy — is a shake to our sense of self.

What if the life I'm living is not my own? What if I am not only the sum of my choices and decisions but also the result of "the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet"?

Lewis's conversion is like Saul's, who was "**Pharisee of Pharisees**" and so wasn't looking for more meaning. Just more Christians to persecute. In the story of Saul's conversion there is nothing but a God who shows up and transforms the self into that which it could have never been on its own. Only God knows the self we're meant to be. Only God knows the self we will, by God, become. Only God can give us a self that is worth having. And God does, in those surprising moments, when we're driving down our routine ruts, and there is, as if out of nowhere, light, voice, summons. Then we know we have been cornered, and we mutter with C. S. Lewis in astonishment, "**So, it was you all along.**"

THE SERMON IN A SENTENCE:

The Bible says that God comes to us; we don't come to God.

YOU:

How has God's love come to you? How are you vividly aware of it? How has his love transformed you? Is it still transforming you?

CLOSE:

But Lewis realizes that Joy has flown. . . . Joy, imagination, and intellect do not come together until the story's end, when Lewis's will is finally converted in a way that is completely unreachable by reason . . . Only then does Lewis again find himself able to experience Joy - not as an end in itself, but as a signpost from God pointing him to God.

Though he sought Joy, it found him. Just as Paul sought God his whole life, God surprised him when he didn't expect it and the world was never the same. Perhaps as you eat the bread and drink the cup this morning you will be surprised by God.

Let's prepare our hearts with prayer...