

The One In Charge Changes Everything  
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First Presbyterian Church, Newton  
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Acts 9: 1-20I

Saul is muttering threats against the Christians. He is going to Damascus, where he is going to clean up the city, and get rid of these heretics. They will be arrested and sent back for trial. We can't have this! We have to clean up the town!

And you know the story: along the way, Jesus appears and knocks Saul off of his horse. He is blinded by the light! He falls to the ground, blind, stunned. A voice comes out of the light, saying, "Saul! Why are you persecuting me?"

Saul's reply is very interesting.

Have you ever had an occasion where something dramatic happened? You weren't sure what it meant, or exactly who it was, but you knew that it was something big. I knew a woman who told me once of the time when Jesus came to visit her in the hospital. I could think she was crazy, she said; most people did. But she knew it was he — who else could it be?

That's pretty dramatic, to have Jesus walk into your hospital room!

But Saul replies, "who are you, Lord?" That's the interesting part. Whoever it is, Saul already knows he is dealing with the Lord God. And he says so: who are you, Lord? Sometimes we know we are dealing with God from the beginning!

And the voice replies, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting!"

Now, imagine. Saul is going to kill these Christians as heretics and blasphemers. This Jesus is not someone to be worshiped. He is not the Lord. He is, or was, an imposter, a fraud and a liar. Saul is going to take care of his followers, and stamp out this pernicious sect. Yet here Saul is, laying the ground, blinded, with Jesus talking to him! Talk about cognitive dissonance!

Saul's world has been reshaped, reorganized. It has been invaded and turned upside down by the Risen Lord. Nothing will ever be the same for him again. He has to rethink everything he does and everything he stands for.

The others it says heard the voice but saw nothing. One wonders what they heard — the words, or just the noise? They led Saul to Damascus and he ate nothing for three days, while he lay there, blind.

Meanwhile in Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. There are several Ananiases in Acts; this guy is a good guy. He has a vision, in which the Lord instructs him to go and find a man from Tarsus named Saul. He has seen a vision that you come to him.

But, but, but Lord! I have heard about this man, about how much evil he has done. He is only here to find and kill believers, people like, well, like me! Please don't make me go there!

It's a little like when Moses was called to go to Pharaoh, and said, "Here am I! Send Aaron!" Ananias has this thing, we call it an instinct for self-preservation. He doesn't want to do this. Anything but this, Lord!

God of course answers that Saul is his chosen one to preach to the Gentiles, and so Ananias must go. And he does, though with trembling fear and weak knees!

He goes, lays his hands on Saul, (the medical treatment of the day) and says, "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." Something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see. He was baptized, and began to eat.

Way to go, Ananias!

### III

He began to preach in the synagogues, proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God. Everyone who heard him said, "wait a minute! Isn't this the guy who came to arrest Christians? They do the only reasonable thing: they decide to kill him. But he learns of the plot and escapes. He goes back to Jerusalem, meets the apostles, and stays there until it becomes dangerous, so then he goes off to Tarsus. Back home. There, according to the tale he tells in Galatians, he stayed for a decade or so. I imagine he was studying the scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, looking for references to the coming of the Messiah. Getting his story straight. Once he did, he became a mighty preacher to the Gentiles.

### IV

If you haven't connected all the dots, this Saul I have been talking about you know as Paul. He takes on a new and slightly different name, dissociating himself from his history as Saul, the Christian-hater. He is a new man, and so takes on a new name.

Remember last week I was talking about Dr. Allen's image of the spiritual journey as a hike up a hill? I said that some people get so excited by the dizziness of being converted that they like to do it again and again. Paul's conversion becomes the model: if you haven't had an experience like Paul's, well, you might not be a Christian! How many people have gone to revivals and tried to manufacture an experience, just to be sure! I have good news for you if you are one of those: relax. Some people come to faith like

Paul, knocked off their horse. But many people come into it slowly, some so slowly that they can't quite place the date on it. Maybe you were raised in the church, and never thought of yourself as outside of the faith.

I knew an old pastor who said the neighbor girl became worried about him, because even though he was a pastor, he didn't have the "right" kind of faith journey. She was always over there asking him when he became a Christian. You should know the date, she said. When were you saved?

He finally answered her, "I was saved when Jesus died on the cross. What about you?"

Good answer!

What matters is not when, nor how, but that you come to faith. For some, it is quick, for others, it is a long hard struggle. But if you believe, that's what matters. Now, a certain sort of evangelicalism has messed up our minds here. I remember a man who was a confident Christian all his life. But at the end, some folks decided they needed to be sure, and went to see him, and got him to pray the "sinner's prayer." Just minutes before his funeral one of them called me to assure me he'd been saved! They wouldn't rest — or let him rest — until they were satisfied he met their requirements.

Here's the thing: Jesus never said, "I need you all the say this prayer." No one in the scriptures ever said that. I know, Billy Graham told us we should, but he wasn't Jesus. I'm just saying, if you believe, that is enough. And you don't even have to swallow every line of the Apostles' Creed, or whatever; just believe. Try to be obedient, and God will take care of the rest.

Jesus tells Ananias in a vision that Paul is the one chosen to preach to the Gentiles. This is why Paul says he was sent — he is an apostle — to the Gentiles. And Paul was the perfect person for his task: he was a Roman citizen. He was educated in the Greek tradition; he knew the Greek poets, for example. He was also trained by the rabbis, so that he knew the Jewish Law inside and out. He could talk with Jews as a Jew, and the Gentiles as one of them.

But back to us in the present. I imagine some of you are pretty comfortable in your faith, in your routine, in the things you do and believe. I imagine you don't want to be knocked off of your horse! But what if Jesus comes and does exactly that? What if you get a call, have a vision, dream a dream? What if Jesus sends his Spirit to conk you over the head or make your blind? Or even better, open your blind eyes to see what the Spirit is doing around you?

I don't want anyone to go crazy here, but think about it. What would it mean to your practice of your faith if Jesus showed up?

Susan and I met a man in New Jersey who'd sold everything and moved his family into a motel. They were waiting on God to tell them what was next. For all I know, they are still waiting. Some responses don't seem to make sense, do they?

But if Jesus shows up, suddenly, changing everything — are you ready?

Thanks be to God! Amen.