

Imagine this. You are driving in your car, minding your own business, when all of a sudden you see in your rear view mirror the flashing colored lights of a police car. You’re getting pulled over! A glance at the speedometer shows that you’ve been doing fifteen miles per hour over the limit. You didn’t notice, but the officer did.

The sinking feeling you experience when this happens is unpleasant, but it’s nothing compared to what Saul feels in his gut on the Damascus Road, that we somewhat blandly refer to as his conversion. A more accurate name for this incident would be *“the most terrifying experience of his life.”*

Saul is traveling down the road, like us, minding his own business. Only in this case, his business was the systematic persecution and execution of the unorthodox and disgraceful followers of a certain Jesus of Nazareth. Here’s how Saul himself later describes this period of his life to the churches in Galatia: *“For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God, and tried to destroy it”* (1:13).

By the time he appears on the road to Damascus, Saul has already made a career of imprisoning the followers of Jesus, not to mention that he’s also complicit in their deaths. What takes him to Damascus is that he has garnered the franchise for similar work there, and is pursuing it with vigor. Moreover, by doing so, he believes he is advancing a good and holy cause. On the highway leading him into Damascus, Saul sees a much bigger version of the flashing colored lights of a police cruiser.

It’s not a light in the rear view mirror that stops him in his tracks. It’s directly in front of him. Saul and his traveling companions are surrounded by a light more brilliant than the sun on the brightest summer day. They fall to the ground, awestruck and afraid, terrified by what may happen next. Then a voice addresses him, using his Hebrew name. *“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”* (Acts 22:7). The voice recognizes him, but he does not recognize the voice. Saul is shaken. These things sort of things don’t happen every day. And then the voice reveals himself: *“I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting”* (v. 9). Saul figures that showing respect to this awesome voice would be wise, since the voice claims, remarkably, to be suffering at his hands. So he asks, *“What shall I do, Lord?”* and he’s given an answer (v. 10).

You or I, pulled over for speeding, might get a ticket and a fine, some points perhaps on our driving record. Saul gets pulled over too. But once the voice identifies himself, Saul is expecting that he would soon die. After all, he had taken upon himself putting to death the followers of Jesus. Now, Jesus appears before him in blinding brilliance, making it clear that the mistreatment of Jesus’ followers is the same as mistreating him. Saul finds himself in the most frightening experience of his life, which could easily have been the LAST experience of his life.

Saul was the only one to understand the voice of Jesus, even though his fellow travelers also saw the flashing light. What Jesus says to identify himself could easily be taken as a death sentence for Saul. Yet that which follows brings about a sort of resurrection. *“Get up” the Lord said, “and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do”* (v. 10). Jesus goes on to commission Saul,

this persecutor of Christ and Christ followers, and he becomes a remarkable advocate for the gospel of Christ.

Saul is converted, turned around, spun like a top, and sent packing in a different direction, that from him and out of his experience the world may hear the gospel announced with grace and power. And twenty centuries later, he's still declaring the good news of the gospel.

The initial shock for Saul is that Jesus is alive, not only in eternal light, but in his maligned and persecuted followers. The next shock for Saul, of no less importance, is that there is for him no condemnation, but rather a commission, a place for him with Jesus.

A remarkable truth takes possession of Saul's life—that Jesus and his disciples are one. The disciples cannot be understood apart from Jesus, and Jesus cannot be understood separated from his disciples. This bursts upon Paul's awareness with the force of a tornado, it strikes him with horror, yet only a moment later it leads to immense relief that his old life lost has been traded for a new life.

Saul's realization is framed by his experience as a persecutor. Others realize this same truth that Jesus and his disciples are one according to their particular circumstances. In fact I believe our vitality as a congregation depends on the extent to which we let people experience this truth through us. As a congregation, we are to allow people to meet Jesus; and to meet him *through us*. They are to come to the same realization that overtook Saul with such force: Jesus is alive; he identifies with his disciples and his disciples identify with him. They are one.

It happens to people in diverse ways, due to their different circumstances. Few come as Paul did, as an official agent of persecution. Some will come out of their pain, out of their confusion, their curiosity, their spiritual hunger, their exhausted cynicism, their innocent hope, their sin sickness, or from another state of the soul. What matters is that they recognize Jesus is alive, and he and his followers are one. That is central to every calling.

People respond to this recognition in manifold ways. Some answer readily, others slowly. Some loudly, others quietly. There are those who turn away or who are not yet ready for commitment. We cannot determine another person's response. All we must do is to manifest Christ, the One not ashamed to die for us, the One not ashamed to identify himself with the likes of us.

Few of us have had a dramatic Damascus Road conversion like that of Saul's. But what matters is not so much "how" we came to faith but "what" our faith is producing in our life and in the lives of those around us. If given an opportunity to speak about his faith, as he is here in Acts 22 before the soldiers take him to the barracks, Paul points his listeners to the story of his conversion, what for a moment felt like the most frightening experience of his life. As a result of that Damascus Road experience, which is narrated no less than *three times* in the book of Acts, a truth begins to grow within Saul that Jesus and his disciples are inseparable. They're unified. They are one.

Paul, as he would be called later, has hope that all Christians would encounter this startling truth through the life of their own congregation. Whether or not this realization feels like their *last* experience of life, his hope would be that for many it would seem like their *first*—a personal calling to follow Jesus.

Adam Hamilton says that God uses every puzzle piece of Paul's life to create something beautiful and useful, as he does in our lives too (*The Call*, p. 23). That's why the details of Saul's life are important if we are to understand the man and his message. Where did he come from? What were his circumstances?

Gabriella Siefert says that "Historians have spilled much ink since America's founding over one single question: Is the U.S. a Christian nation? Many believers today find comfort in the notion that their country was founded by many men and women of great faith. Others might prefer to scratch out references to God found in the Declaration of Independence and all fifty of the state constitutions.

Whatever side of this debate one lands on, the importance of accurately understanding and interpreting our nation's history remains all the same. We live in a complex world where people often try to bend and twist historical truth to suit their needs. And where our ability to appreciate people's great contributions to our country's story may be hindered by their own imperfections" (*Christianity Today*, May 27, 2019).

As Dr. Tracy McKenzie of the Wheaton College History department writes, human beings "will be tempted, subconsciously at least, to distort what we see in order to find what we are looking for." My sincere hope for this summer sermon series is that we steer clear of *distorting* Paul and instead focus on *discovering* Paul anew, his message and his call. Amen.