

The Lord is willing to do whatever it takes to get our attention. So, we would save both God and ourselves a lot of time and energy if we would just pay attention to the Lord from the start.

C.S. Lewis was one of the most famous Christian thinkers and writers of the twentieth century. However, he initially paid virtually no attention to the Lord. Lewis was, in fact, a virulent opponent of Christianity until God graciously got his attention in 1931. He later called his conversion the result of “the steady, unrelenting approach of him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet.”

We could say that about Saul too. He “earnestly desired not to meet” the risen Jesus. He grew up in the city of Tarsus, which means that he grew up surrounded by Gentiles. Saul eventually became one of the Pharisees who believed that Israel needed more than anything to return to a strict observance of their religious laws and traditions. After finishing his schooling, he took a job with the religious authorities. Saul’s basic job was to ensure that *nothing changed within Judaism*. And in his day, the greatest threat to the status quo was a group that called itself “The Way.”

Acts 9 offers us the opportunity to consider and explore *change* and how it comes about. A good friend also in ministry once told me that he believes church people experience almost any change as loss. He’s no doubt right about that. But why do we so virulently disagree with other Christians over changing anything that has to do with our faith? Would it be dangerous for us to assume we are never wrong in our personal interpretation of Scripture? Well, yes, OF COURSE it would be dangerous! Saul interpreted what we call the Old Testament very literally. His interpretation left no room for Jesus of Nazareth to be the promised Messiah who God raised from the dead, and that Jesus’ followers claimed was the “Way” to God for both Jews and Gentiles. Since thousands of good Jews had already begun following Jesus, Saul was determined to put a stop to that *change* by crushing the movement.

That's why when Saul hears that the Jesus movement has spread to Damascus, he heads straight for that city. He's so afraid of how Jewish followers of Jesus might *change* his own faith that he rides there to hunt them down. Stephen, back in chapters 6 & 7, reminded the mob that called for his death that their ancestors also persecuted God's prophets. Saul's murderous work currently puts him squarely in the company of the persecutors of the prophets—then; and of the apostles—now. As verse 1 states, "*Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.*" Stephen called his enemies "murderers."

However, Stephen prayed that God would not hold Saul's approval of his murder against him. Now God shows Saul just how far he is willing to go to answer that prayer. On route to Damascus—*on the way to someplace*—which is where *change* always seems to happen, the risen Christ gets Saul's attention and God knocks Saul off his high horse.

Into Saul's obsession with saving the Jewish faith from *change*, comes the risen and ascended Jesus Christ who asks the question, "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*" So, the One whom Saul assumes is a "dead religious fraud" speaks to him by name. Saul answers not with the reason for his persecution, but with a question about the heavenly speaker's identity. Jesus, in turn, answers, "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*" As it turns out, Saul isn't just persecuting Jesus' followers. Indeed, he's persecuting Jesus himself! That suggests there's far more to this Jesus than Saul ever imagined. The One whom the Roman soldiers had executed is alive even now.

Conversion stories are often about people who come to recognize their sinfulness which prompts them to plead for God's forgiveness. But Saul's conversion clearly isn't his idea. He doesn't come to the conclusion that he is a wretched sinner who needs God's forgiveness. Nor does Saul recognize that he's made himself God's enemy by persecuting those he wrongly assumes are enemies of his religion. Saul's conversion is entirely God's idea that comes to

him at God's initiative. In this moment God shows Saul much more about God than he'd ever imagined.

One biblical scholar has said that our understanding of God determines both our faith and life. That means, if our view of God changes, so does everything else. Inversely, if we want to change, we may need to let God change our view of who God is. Because God created us in his image, those who have a flawed view of God also have a flawed view of themselves. So, we might say that until our understanding of God *changes*, you and I can't really *change*.

Yet God never changes us *for the sake of change*. God always transforms us so we can participate more fully in God's kingdom work. However, unbelieving Saul isn't the only one God wants to change. God has left the one who was persecuting God's only Son as helpless as a baby. Saul's travelling companions must hold his hand like they'd hold the hand of a toddler and lead him into town. There Saul spends 3 days in the dark, perhaps alone, unable to either eat or drink. He becomes, in other words, like the kind of young child who alone is prepared for entrance into God's kingdom, so Jesus says. For a total of 3 days he was blind—not an accidental number—Jonah in the fish, Jesus in the tomb.

In the meantime, a man named Ananias has his own encounter with the risen Lord. He's one of Jesus' new followers who may be hiding in his home from the very Saul whose attention God has just gotten by knocking him onto the ground. When the Lord gets Ananias' attention by calling his name, he literally responds nothing like Saul did, by asking who he's talking to, but with a more immediate affirmative, "*Yes, Lord.*" God then tells him to get up and go to the house where Saul is staying, lay hands on him and heal him.

One biblical scholar compares this task to that of a Jewish rabbi in Germany making a house call on Adolf Hitler in 1930's. Ananias assumes he already knows everything that he needs to know about "*this man,*" Saul. So, he basically tells God, "You can't be serious!" But the Lord doesn't argue with Ananias. He just repeats Ananias' assignment with emphasis: "*Go!*"

After all, that's God's consistent commission to his church, perhaps especially when it's fearfully hiding behind various locked doors: "Get up and go to those who scare you. Get up and go to your enemies. Get up and fearlessly go as a disciple to work, or school or wherever your daily routine usually takes you." Notice too that the Lord graciously shares his strategy for Saul in order to allay the fears of Ananias. But he did not tell Ananias to tell Saul *everything* that was planned for him. That would have been too much too soon for blind Saul. Come to think of it, the Lord seldom gives us our life plan all at once. He gives us just enough to help us set our life goals according to his purposes, and then walk in obedience with him day by day.

Acts 9 reports that Ananias gets up and goes to his former persecutor. There he lays his hands on the one who he'd just referred to as "*this man*" but in person Ananias calls him, "*Brother Saul.*" That's when Saul's healing begins; and he can see clearly. And when Saul can finally see again, who's the first person he undoubtedly sees? It's precisely one of the people he had previously devoted his life to exterminating. Now, however, Ananias is not an enemy, but a Christian brother.

God continues his transformation of Saul when he is baptized and receives food—perhaps even the Lord's Supper. Prepared in that way by the Lord, he promptly begins to "*preach*" Jesus' name "*in the synagogues*" of Damascus. In their synagogues Paul insists that the Jesus that he was persecuting is actually the Son of God. He may have even admitted that he was wrong in traveling there to persecute Jesus' followers and instead invites all Jews to turn with him to Jesus and believe in him. That's the kind of amazing work the risen Jesus sends his disciples to do.

Charles Colson, who was known as Richard Nixon's "hatchet man," was implicated in the 1974 Watergate scandal. After serving seven months in prison for his role in the scandal, he was released in early 1975. Two years later, he publicly proclaimed that he had "accepted Jesus Christ." He describes that conversion in his book, *Born Again*.

Perhaps Saul of Tarsus and Colson's stories parallel each other in at least a couple of ways: First, prison and its attending humiliation rendered Charles Colson child-like in some ways. In prison, he had to depend on guards to provide him with nearly everything. Perhaps God even used that dependence to deepen Colson's sense of dependence on the Lord.

Secondly, God brought a man named Tom Philips, the president of the Raytheon Company, alongside Colson to help and encourage him. It was Philips who first shared his testimony of his Christian faith with Colson. It was also Philips who walked alongside Colson as the Holy Spirit deepened his relationship with Jesus Christ. Charles Colson, a Watergate conspirator, went on to establish Prison Fellowship, a ministry that still works to bring hope and restoration to prisoners, families and communities impacted by crime and incarceration. One personal footnote: Jeb Stuart Magruder who also served seven months in prison for the Watergate scandal, was a student at Princeton Seminary when I was a student. He went on to be ordained as Minister of Word and Sacrament and served Presbyterian churches in Ohio and Kentucky.

Remember how Saul first met the risen Lord? Jesus clarified that the persecution endured by his people was his own persecution and suffering. Later, Paul had the view that his own sufferings were connected to the sufferings of Christ. When writing to the Corinthians, he begins his second letter by saying, "*For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ*" (2 Corinthians 1:5).

The final verse of today's Scripture says, "*At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the son of God*" (v. 20). That is, he *immediately* went to the synagogues in Damascus to share the good news he had just received, because that news was *too good* to keep to himself!

For Saul, everything had changed. Praise the name of Jesus! Amen.