

Don't you wonder what it must've been like for the disciples when God was first revealing his plans to them for their church? In studying the Book of Acts, one of the things that strikes me is how they were constantly discovering new things about God. With a sense of anticipation, they got up every morning filled with expectations. Today, we're going to talk about St. Paul's conversion, about how he himself learned to live with this same sense of anticipation and about what this has to do with us in our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

ACTS 22:3-16

Paul said, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today. ⁴I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, ⁵as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished.

⁶"But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, ⁷and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' ⁸And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.' ⁹And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me.¹⁰ And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.' ¹¹But since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me and came into Damascus.

¹²"A certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, *and* well-spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³came to me, and standing near said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very time I looked up at him. ¹⁴And he said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from his mouth. ¹⁵For you will be a witness for him to all men of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'

Paul exclaimed to the people gathered around him, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today. ⁴I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons" (vv.3-4).

Paul was the smartest guy in the room. A prodigy, he'd been chosen at a young age to study at the feet of Gamaliel, the most brilliant teacher of the 1st century—a rabbi's rabbi. But despite his intelligence, because he was misdirected, Paul did some really dumb things. I spent years in academia as a student and as a teacher. And one of the things I discovered is that there is no shortage of dumb smart people!

It's too easy to be carried away by popular philosophies and political ideologies, philosophies and ideas that have no foundation in truth. Paul said, he was **“zealous for God.”** The only thing worse than a dumb lazy person is a dumb zealous person. In his zeal, Paul confessed, **“I persecuted this Way to the death.”** Indeed, he led the stoning of Stephen, a deacon of Christ, whom they said had the face of an angel (Acts 6:15).

Paul said, **“it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ ⁸ And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting’” (vv.6-8).**

Paul literally saw the light. In the two second exchange—somewhere between, **“Who are you, Lord?”** And **“I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting,”** Paul's heart must have pulled a triple gainer in the middle of his chest, and he realized, “Everything I've believed, and everything I've been doing has been wrong!”

He must've been absolutely terrified! His life flashed before his eyes, and in that moment, I'm sure he must've remembered the young man with the face of an angel, Stephen, whose death he had ordered, who had said, with his final breath, **“Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).**

Paul said, **“‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to (him), ‘Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do’” (v.10).**

Jesus could've appeared to Paul in his resurrected body, or in a dream, or he could've sent an angel with his message. But Jesus appeared to Paul as **“a very**

bright light that flashed from heaven” – he came to him as lightning, a sign of judgment. He meant business, and he got Paul’s attention.

It’s tempting to say that despite Paul’s brilliance and learning, he was saved. But I think it was the just opposite. The thing that distinguishes genius from ordinary smarts is not the kinds of thoughts one has. Rather, genius is how fast one’s brain works, recognizing relationships, putting two and two together. Paul’s genius led him to put all the puzzle pieces of the picture together instantly, and he realized then and there that if Jesus was the messiah, then there was only one thing he could do: Submit, surrender, relinquish himself to the Lord. His humility was complete: It was emotional, and intellectual, and physical. Blinded by Christ’s light, his friends led him by the hand to Damascus where he would receive further instruction.

In Damascus, Paul met Ananias. Earlier, God had instructed Ananias, saying, **“Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named (Paul)....¹⁵ Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; ¹⁶ for I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Acts 9:11,15-16).**

Ananias was afraid, for he knew Paul’s reputation. But he trusted God’s voice, and he did his bidding. As I said last week, God in his wisdom has chosen to work through people, empowering us to fulfill his will. Of course, if I was God, I would have just taken care of all this myself. But God in his mercy has not given up on us; he loves us so much he’s entrusted the treasures of his kingdom to you and me, calling us to be his ambassadors.

Ananias rose to the occasion, and he said to Paul, **“The God of our fathers has appointed you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from his mouth.¹⁵ For you will be a witness for him to all men of what you have seen and heard” (vv.14-15).**

As we learned earlier, when an apostle was chosen to replace Judas Iscariot, one of the requirements was that he had seen and heard the voice of Jesus himself. Thus with Christ’s appearance to him, Paul was saved and he was promoted. He was inducted into the apostolic ministry, for he was now able to give personal witness to God’s glory in his son, Jesus.

Ananias referred to Jesus as **“the Righteous One.”** So did Stephen before he was stoned (Acts 7:52). About 800 years earlier the Prophet Isaiah had written, **“By his knowledge the Righteous One, my servant, will justify the many, as he will bear their iniquities” (Isaiah 53:11).**

This is the essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, **“the Righteous One”**; he died for our sins; he justified us before God Almighty; and we have been made whole.

Ananias said to Paul, **“Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16).** A more literally translation would read, **“Let yourself actually be baptized. Let yourself actually be washed of your sins.”** In other words, give up; relinquish yourself to the God who gave his Son Jesus up for you; don’t hold back, but fall into the arms of the Lord who loves you so much and be ACTUALLY renewed.

This has been the message from the beginning, ever since Peter preached baptism at Pentecost when he proclaimed, **“be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38; cf. Titus 3:5; Ephesians 5:26).**

Jesus did not come to us as lightening as he did with Paul, for there’s no judgment. We have been adopted as God’s sons and daughters. But Jesus says to you and me, **“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).** In this light we walk with Christ in peace and love. In this light, we know the truth and it has set us free. In this light, we are fearless and we press forward for the upward call of God on our lives.

Paul called the Christian faith the **“Way.”** Jesus gave himself the title, **“the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).** His light shines down on us, and he lifts us up from the ways of the world, from the confusion and heartache, from the shadows and darkness all around, and he walks with you and me. Let’s pray this, that the Lord would be our way, that his truth would be our truth, that his life would be our lives.

There are all kinds of things to take away from this study. But one of them that is especially meaningful to me is the sense of immediacy of God’s presence the disciples had, the sense of anticipation with which they lived. They knew God was

present, and they knew he was going to take care of them. Even under the threat of death, they knew they belonged to him.

There are things in my past which trigger in my heart a sense of regret. There are things in my present which arouse a sense of frustration. But I remember how the Lord has worked through the ages, how he spoke to the disciples, and how he speaks to you and me. And so, just like the disciples, I can live with a sense of anticipation too, knowing that God is present in my life even now.

In the Bible, God says, **“Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9)**. I claim these words for myself, and I pray, “Dear Lord, lift me up in your power, wipe away all my fear, and lead me. Amen.”

God says, **“You are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God’s OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1st Peter 2:9)**. And so I pray, “Heavenly Father, this church is your church, your **“own possession.”** Let us proclaim your **“excellencies”** to our neighbors with love that together we may live in your light. Amen.”

God says, **“you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” (Romans 8:15)**. And so I pray, “Abba! Father! Deliver us from fear, from bondage to sin, from regret and self-doubt, and let us go forth with courage and confidence doing the work you’ve blessed us to do. Amen.”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week let us live with a sense of anticipation for how the Lord will reveal himself to us.

This week let us thank God for his light that reveals his way, his truth, and his life for us.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.