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Acts 9:1-9
Could You Be Wrong About God?
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In Acts 8:3 we are told, "Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house, dragging off both men and women, committing them to prison." This great persecutor of the church was Saul of Tarsus.

Tarsus was not a Jewish town. It was in the Roman province of Asia Minor, which is now the nation of Turkey. That meant that Saul the Jew grew up around Gentiles. It wasn't easy to be a minority, so he responded to the challenges by taking his faith very seriously. Saul eventually made it to Jerusalem where he studied law under the eminent religious scholar Gamaliel. He became a Pharisee, which was a religious party in Judaism that believed most of Israel's problems were a result of experimenting with the non-Jewish world. What the country needed, they believed, was to return to a strict observance of Jewish law and tradition. Before long, Saul got a job with the religious establishment. His responsibility was to make sure that nothing changed in Judaism.

At the time, the greatest threat to orthodox faith was a new cult called "The Way." Much later it would be called Christianity. The founder of this Jewish sect, a Galilean rabbi named Jesus, had been crucified. The authorities thought that would put an end to it, but his followers were claiming that he rose from the dead and that he was The Way to God, and thus The Way back to being ourselves. Since Pentecost, thousands of Jews had become followers of this Jesus. Saul was determined to put a stop to it. The word was that many of these Jewish believers in Jesus were now in Damascus. Saul was so afraid at what they were doing to his faith that he got permission to go to Damascus to hunt down the followers of Jesus.

Along the road to Damascus, en route on a mission to help out God, Saul was blinded by light. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He responded, "Who are you, Lord?" And the voice said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." So there was more to God than Saul knew. He really had come to earth in Jesus, and Jesus was alive!

Notice, this is not the conversion of a penitent sinner. Saul is not coming to God asking for forgiveness. That comes later. In fact, this conversion is not even Saul's idea. This is the most important thing to remember about real change, or authentic conversion in a life. It always comes as God's idea—not our own. There is no one in the Bible whom God loves to convert more than religious people—those who like Saul have spent a lot of time learning a lot of theology, who are good people, and who are zealous, committed... and wrong.

Most of us can muster up enough humility to admit that we are not always right. But the hardest area to be wrong is in our ideas about God. That's because, whether we realize it or not, our understanding of God is at the base of everything we believe. So if our understanding of God changes, everything else in life will have to change as well.

The inverse of this is also true. Sometimes you want to make a few changes in your life, like being less stressed, or controlling, or more patient, but you'll never succeed in changing until you see God differently.

That's because you are made in the image of God, and if you have a flawed self, it is rooted in a flawed image of God. Thus, change in your life always begins with changes in your vision of the God in whose image you are made.

Isn't it interesting that Saul was blinded by light? There was more to the light of God than he had seen, and when he saw the truth revealed in Jesus Christ, it changed Saul. No information, no matter how theologically correct, will do that for us. That's because The Way to truth, to God, and to your real self is not through what you know, but who you know. This is why, years later, Saul would make such a strong case for seeing ourselves "In Christ." That is how we know who we really are. As the Holy Spirit adopts you into the Son's relationship with the Father, you start to see yourself as the beloved of God.

After Saul was blinded, they led him into Damascus. So the place where he set out to go as a persecutor of the church became the place of prayer, which is what Saul did while life was darkened long enough for him to focus on the risen Jesus Christ. When your life has been interrupted by God and you have been knocked off of the path you were on, and you cannot even see how to keep moving ahead, have the courage to do nothing for a while. Nothing, but prayer. For it is in prayer that we stand before God, and then see the new directions he is calling us to move.

Meanwhile Ananias, one of the followers of Jesus who was hiding in Damascus from Saul, got a vision of his own from the Lord. Jesus told him to go to the home where Saul was staying and lay hands on him that he might regain his sight. Ananias gently reminds the Lord that Saul is the man who has "done evil to your saints in Jerusalem." Jesus doesn't really argue with Ananias. He just gives the commission again: "Go." And thus, again we see a religious person getting converted. Saul was converted from being a persecutor to an apostle of the church. Ananias was converted from fear and hiding to hospitality.

In one of the finest moments of the Early Church, Ananias goes to his persecutor. He places his hands on Saul. And the first words he says, the first words Saul heard from the church he tried to destroy, were, "Brother Saul." At the time Luke wrote this story, the Early Church was at times severely persecuted, as it was for the next three hundred years, and as it still is in some parts of the world today. The way the church has always overcome persecution is by reaching out to the tormentor saying, "Brother Saul." That is what Christ asks of you in responding to your tormentor as well. Can you say it to the Ex? To the person who is trying to get your job? To the person who has dragged you into court? It is the only way to overcome evil—with love.

The Lord also told Ananias, "Saul is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles, and kings, and before the people of Israel." Conversion in the Bible is always, always, linked to vocation—or calling. The purpose of the changes God brings to our lives is not just because it feels good, but because it allows us to serve as his instruments. That is the purpose behind the changes God is working in your life—to be an instrument that Jesus will use to change your part of the world until it looks like him. Like a skilled craftsman, Jesus has more than one instrument in his bag, and he uses you in the unique calling you have been given.

Notice that in Jesus' hands, nothing is ever wasted. As it turns out, Jesus could use a feisty, over-educated Pharisee who grew up with Gentiles to take the gospel around the world. Without his background in Tarsus, Saul would never have understood the Gentiles for whom he served as a missionary. And without his training in Jewish law, he would not have been able to defend that mission to the Jewish Community.

The things about you that you cherish and the things about you that you would like changed are all useful instruments in the hands of Jesus. Even your hurts, your limitations, and all the time you thought you had wasted have a use in the hands of Jesus, who uses you not in spite of those things, but through them. Nothing is wasted.

The changes in Saul's life were so dramatic that those around him eventually changed his name from Saul the Persecutor to Paul the Apostle. Similarly, the changes in your life can be so dramatic that your name changes as well, but it is really the name you have had since baptism: Christ-ian.

Maybe you would say that you have not had a Damascus Road experience. The light hasn't blinded you. There have been no voices from heaven. But I wonder if that is true. Peter Berger has said, "It is not given to us to make God speak. It is only given to us to live and think in such a way that if God's thunder should come, we will not have stopped our ears."

I believe God is talking all the time. The question is, are we listening? When a child wanders into your office at home, it could just be an interruption of important work, or it could be the voice from heaven asking if you are going blind with ambition. When you pick up the newspaper to read about violence in Iraq or on the streets of Pittsburgh, it could just be unrelated news, or it could be the voice from heaven asking if it isn't time for you to make a difference. When you read the holy words of the Bible, it could just be a book of stories about God's drama with ancient people, or it could be that beneath the text is the subtext of God's drama with your life. If you could only hear the love for you embedded in every word, it would change everything in your life.

Whenever God speaks, it is always to reveal more of Christ to you. About this I am certain: there is more to God than you know, which means there is also more to your life than you know. *Amen.*