

# “Jerked Up Short”

Acts 21:37-22:5; **Acts 22:6-16** (also Acts 9:1-31, 22:1-23, 26:1-32) <sup>1</sup>

It was the wee hours of the morning on a stormy August night in 1975. I was the Officer of the Deck, and our destroyer was involved in war games off the coast of North Carolina, in the vicinity of Onslow Bay. I’ve never seen lightning so intense as it was that night. There were no exercises scheduled before morning, but we were still supposed to avoid the “bad guys” as we steamed through the darkness.

At about 1 a.m., we picked up some radar contacts about twenty miles out that tracked on a constant bearing with decreasing range. That meant that if nothing changed, our relative motion was such that we would eventually collide with each other. As was customary, the Captain’s Night Orders required me to alert him to any contacts that would pass within two miles of us. Since we were in fishing waters close to shore, I told the Captain that while the contacts would pass close aboard, they were probably small fishing boats.

We continued to track these contacts on radar, and eventually their running lights began to be faintly visible at the horizon, even in the storm. As soon as I saw those lights through the binoculars, I knew that these were not fishing boats. They were warships—they were the “bad guys.” I ordered the engines to full speed and ordered the helmsman to throw the rudder hard over. As we did a U-turn and high-tailed it back out to sea, I called the Captain again, this time with “egg on my face.” I had been “jerked up short,” as we sometimes put such things. Has something like that ever happened to you?

I can remember more than half a dozen times when I’ve been “jerked up short” in my relationship with God, and our text this morning describes what may be the most famous occasion of being “jerked up short” recorded in the Bible. It is, as you might guess, Saul’s encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus Road, of which we read in our text.

Saul’s conversion experience is described three times in the book of Acts. Luke records it in narrative form in Acts 9, and Saul—later Paul—retells the story twice, in chapters 22 and 26, once to a murderous mob in Jerusalem, and once before Festus, the Roman procurator of Judea. We’ll examine Saul’s experience using a three-stage model many people use in giving testimony of their salvation: (1) my life before Christ; (2) how I met Christ; and (3) my life in Christ. <sup>2</sup>

**Saul’s Life Before Christ.** No one could accuse young Saul of Tarsus of having inadequate ambition. He had an impeccable pedigree, and he was unmatched in his zeal for strict obedience to the faith handed down from Moses. As a zealous, ambitious, up-and-coming Pharisee, Saul was angry that Jesus had described the Pharisees as rejected by God, and he was furious-beyond-words that Jesus’ followers now claimed that the same Jesus of Nazareth who had called the Pharisees hypocrites was actually Israel’s long-hoped-for Messiah. <sup>3</sup>

Saul was in the room when Stephen gave his testimony before the High Council, claiming this very thing: “*You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That’s what your ancestors did, and so do you! Name one prophet your ancestors didn’t persecute! They even killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One—the Messiah whom you betrayed and murdered*” (Acts 7:51-52, NLT). And when Stephen said that, Saul gave his full consent to the lynching that followed, as Stephen was dragged out of the

---

<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on January 4, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Mittelberg, Lee Strobel and Bill Hybels, *Becoming a Contagious Christian: Communicating Your Faith in a Style that Fits You* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin W. Robinson, *The Life of Saul* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1918, 1928), p. 48.

council and beyond the city gates, dying beneath a hail of stones thrown by the members of an angry mob.

The Bible tells us that *“A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria . . . but the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went”* (Acts 8:1, 4). And now, because the pestilence of these Jesus-followers had spread its infection abroad, threatening the obedience of the entire nation to its ancient faith, and because he had now tasted blood and rather liked it, Saul began to “carry his fanatical campaign into wider fields.”<sup>4</sup>

We’re told that *“Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord’s followers. So he went to the high priest. He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains”* (Acts 9:1-2).

Damascus is about 150 miles northeast of Jerusalem, a trip that would have taken the better part of a week. During that journey, Saul surely remembered how Stephen had died, just a few feet in front of where Saul watched over the coats of those who stoned him. Saul remembered how Stephen had turned his eyes toward heaven and said, *“Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand!”* Saul remembered that as the people stoned Stephen, he fell to his knees, shouting, *“Lord, don’t charge them with this sin!”* and then, *“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”* (Acts 7:54-59).

**How Saul Met Christ.** As he made his way resolutely toward Damascus, Saul “could not and would not admit the possibility that people like Peter and Stephen could be right, while people like himself and the Sanhedrin could be mistaken; or that the Messiah could be a Nazarene who had been crucified as a [criminal]; or that after looking for Him so many generations, and making their whole religious life turn on His expected Advent, Israel should have . . . murdered Him when at last He came.”<sup>5</sup>

As he made his way resolutely toward Damascus, Saul asked himself, “Who was this man who had inspired simple fishermen and ignorant publicans with a wisdom unmatched by the best scholars in Israel? Who was this man to whom His followers turned their last gaze and uttered their last prayer in death; who seemed to breathe upon them from the parted heavens a peace that was beyond all understanding? Who was this man who, as they declared, had risen from the dead; whose body had vanished from the tomb?”<sup>6</sup>

As Saul made his way resolutely toward Damascus, lost in such thought, a nineteenth century commentator penned a powerful description of what happened next: “It was high noon—and in a Syrian noon the sun shines fiercely overhead in an intolerable blaze of boundless light—the cloudless sky glows like molten brass; the white earth under the feet glares like iron in the furnace; the whole air, as we breathe it, seems to quiver as though it were pervaded with subtle flames. . . . Generally at that time of day the traveler will be resting . . . under the shelter of his tent. But . . . Saul was pressing on. . . .

“Round them suddenly from heaven there lightened a great light. It was not Saul alone who was conscious of it. It seemed as though the whole atmosphere had caught fire, and they were suddenly wrapped in sheets of blinding splendor. It might be imagined that nothing can out-dazzle the glare of a Syrian sun at noon; but this light was more vivid than [the sun’s] brightness, more penetrating than its flame. And with the light came to those who journeyed with Saul an awful but

<sup>4</sup> Edgar J. Goodspeed, *Saul* (Philadelphia: Winston, 1947), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> F.W. Farrar, *The Life and Work of St. Saul* (1879; New York: E.P. Dutton, 1902), p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> Farrar, p. 105.

unintelligible sound. . . . They were conscious that something [dreadful was happening] . . . . but the vision was not for them. . . .<sup>7</sup>

*“Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?”*

*“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.*

*“I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”*

*The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone’s voice but saw no one! Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he found that he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus (Acts 9:3-8).*

**Saul’s Life in Christ.** The commentator continued, “About that which [he] saw and heard [Saul] never wavered. It was the secret of his inmost being; it was the most unalterable conviction of his soul: it was the very crisis and most intense moment of his life. Others might hint at explanations or whisper doubt: Saul *knew*. . . . From that moment Saul was converted. A change total, utter, final had passed over him, had transformed him. God had called him, had revealed His Son in him, had given him grace and power to become an Apostle to the Gentiles, had sent him forth to preach the faith which he had once destroyed . . . and the means of this mighty change all lay in this one fact: at that moment [near Damascus] **he had seen the Lord Jesus Christ.**”<sup>8</sup>

Saul’s transformation was surely one of the greatest examples of being “jerked up short” that has ever happened since the world began, and it is hardly possible to overstate its importance. Indeed, after the resurrection of Jesus, this one encounter may have done more to shape human history than anything else that has ever happened on this planet.<sup>9</sup>

In the first letter we have from his pen, Saul—now known as Paul—told the Christians in the province of Galatia, <sup>11</sup> *Dear brothers and sisters, I want you to understand that the gospel message I preach is not based on mere human reasoning.* <sup>12</sup> *I received my message from no human source, and no one taught me. Instead, I received it by direct revelation from Jesus Christ.*

<sup>13</sup> *You know what I was like when I followed the Jewish religion—how I violently persecuted God’s church. . . .* <sup>15</sup> *But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by his marvelous grace. Then it pleased him* <sup>16</sup> *to reveal his Son to me so that I would proclaim the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles (Galatians 1:11-16).*

<sup>7</sup> Farrar, pp. 107-109.

<sup>8</sup> Farrar, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> “Are we more keen-sighted, more hostile, more eager to disprove the evidence, than the consummate legalist, the admired rabbi, the commissioner of the Sanhedrin, the leading intellect in the schools—learned as Hillel, patriotic as Judas of Gaulon, burning with zeal for the Law as intense as that of Shammai? He was not separated from the events, as we are, by centuries of time. He was not liable to be blinded, as we are, by the dazzling glamour of a victorious Christendom. He had mingled daily with men who had watched from Bethlehem to Golgotha the life of the Crucified, not only with his simple-hearted followers, but with His learned and powerful enemies. He had talked with the priests who had consigned Him to the cross; he had put to death the followers who had wept beside His tomb. He had to face the unutterable horror which, to any orthodox Jew, was involved in the thought of a Messiah who ‘had hung upon a tree.’ He had heard again and again the proofs which satisfied an Annas and a Gamaliel that Jesus was a deceiver of the people. The events on which the Apostles relied, in proof of His divinity, had taken place in the full blaze of contemporary knowledge. He had not to deal with uncertainties of criticism or assaults on authenticity. He could question, not ancient documents, but living men; he could analyze, not fragmentary records, but existing evidence. He had thousands of means close at hand whereby to test the reality or unreality of the Resurrection in which, unto this time, he had so passionately and contemptuously disbelieved. In accepting this half-crushed and wholly execrated faith he had everything in the world to lose—he had nothing conceivable to gain; and yet, in spite of all—overwhelmed by a conviction which he felt to be irresistible—Saul, the Pharisee, became a witness of the Resurrection, a preacher of the Cross” (Farrar, p. 115).

Now being “jerked up short” is seldom so dramatic as my doing a quick U-turn with a destroyer or as Saul’s transformation on the Damascus road. Much more often, God’s Spirit works in our hearts and minds to more gradually reveal to us that our lives are headed for disaster and ruin.

Some of you know the amazing story of martyrdom and transformation recounted in the book, *Through Gates of Splendor* and the movie, *The End of the Spear*.<sup>10</sup> To tell the story much too briefly, missionaries Nate Saint, Roger Youderian, Ed McCully, Jim Elliott, and Peter Fleming were killed by the Waodani (Auca) Indians of Ecuador on January 8, 1956—fifty-nine years ago this week—while trying to establish relationships with the tribe. Their widows chose to remain on the field, and eventually their husbands’ killers were won to faith in Jesus.

After the movie, *The End of the Spear*, came out in 2006, Steve Saint, Nate’s now-adult son, was asked by an interviewer, “So you’ve had a history of reconciliation [with the Waodani] over the years, but wasn’t there a specific moment of [transformation]?”

Steve replied, “It was a developing thing, but I think that the [moment of transformation really happened] with Mincaye [the man who killed my father] and my Aunt Rachel. In her journal she once wrote, ‘Tonight when I was sleeping in the hammock I heard a noise. Somebody was walking around in the dark. Mincaye called out to me and squatted by my fire, wanting to talk.’

“ ‘You said that Waengongi, the Creator, is very strong,’ Mincaye said quietly.

“And Aunt Rachel said, ‘Mincaye, He is very strong. He made everything here, even the dirt.’

“ ‘You said that [Waengongi] could clean somebody’s heart. My heart being very, very dark, can he clean even my heart?’

‘Being very strong, He can clean even your heart.’

“Aunt Rachel wrote that Mincaye got up and walked away, but that the next morning he came back excited. He said: ‘What you said is true. Speaking to God, He has cleaned my heart. Now [my heart] is waatamo—it’s clear like the sky when it has no clouds in it.’ That [change in Mincaye’s heart,” Steve said,] “was the real beginning of [the transformation the movie describes].<sup>11</sup>

Well, I want to bring all this to a close by making three points that I hope you’ll consider carefully:

**First**, just as Saul was extremely religious and also extremely lost, so it is with us. There is no other way to God except the way Jesus made for us; and yet the Good News is that, as Saul and Mincaye discovered, “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved” (Romans 10:13).

My friend, **it doesn’t matter who you are or what you’ve done—God is able to clean your heart.** And, as Saul discovered, **it doesn’t matter how “straight” you are if you’re not covered by the blood of Jesus.** As Billy Graham puts it, *to be “almost saved” is to be “completely lost.”* If that’s your condition today, I urge you to “*confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, [so that] you will be saved.*” Then you will discover for yourself the same joy that Saul and Mincaye found (Romans 10:9).

<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor* (Tyndale, 1957); *The End of the Spear* (Every Tribe Entertainment, 2006), written by Bill Ewing, Bart Gavigan and Jim Hanon, directed by Jim Hanon, produced by William Bowling; on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of these events.

<sup>11</sup> Amanda Knoke, *Decision* (January 2006), 20.

**Second**, if you're already born again, I hope that you'll think carefully about (1) your life before Christ, (2) how you met Christ, and (3) what God has done and is doing in your life since that moment. Do this so that, as Peter wrote, you will "*worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it*" (1 Peter 3:15).

**Finally**, when Saul described his conversion experience the last time, while on trial for his faith, he told the judge, "*I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision*" (Acts 26:19). One of the most frequent things that stunts spiritual growth in our lives and that prevents God's Kingdom from coming "*on earth as it is in heaven*" is that we who follow Jesus receive instructions and guidance from God that we choose to disregard and to disobey. **And so I ask, is there any sense in which you are being disobedient to the heavenly vision God has given you for your life?**

If so, why not make that U-turn today? You'll find, my friend, that there's still room at the Cross for you.