



REORIENTATION

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So far, June has been a month of surprise celebrity visits. Laura Bush made a surprise visit to Afghanistan. Secretary Rice went on a surprise trip to Lebanon. Barack Obama crashed an 8th grade graduation. Jimmy Carter went unannounced to a baseball game. And J Lo made a surprise visit to the Bronx. Who knows? Maybe Hannah Montana is planning to drop by New Day today.

Why do famous people like the element of surprise? Sometimes it's for security purposes, and sometimes it's so they can be anonymous. But a lot of the time, they do it so their visit will have the maximum impact. They know they can cause more of a stir if they catch people off guard by their presence.

It doesn't take very much Bible reading to discover that God is a God of surprise visits. He shows up unannounced and catches people off guard all the time. There's the burning bush with Moses. There's the nighttime voice with Samuel. There's the man in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. And then there's Jesus. Nobody was expecting. God knows how to use the element of surprise for maximum impact.

Our story today is one filled with surprises on every level. Last week we talked about Philip and the Ethiopian – a man who was searching for Christ and just waiting for Philip to walk him into the faith. It was this natural process that made sense.

This morning we're looking at someone who wanted absolutely nothing to do with Christianity, someone who was very anti-church. Then God completely surprised him with a visit, and surprised everyone else with how the man responded.

We're talking, of course, about Saul (or Paul as he goes by later) – the guy who held everyone's coats while they pelted Stephen with rocks. He was dead set against everything Christians stood for, and Stephen's death only lit a fire under him to get more aggressive.

Acts 9:1-19

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a

light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

Without a doubt, this story of Saul on the road to Damascus is one of the most famous conversion stories ever. Luke himself records it three different times in the book of Acts. Not only is it a dramatic event, it is an incredibly significant moment for the whole church, because Saul will go on to become the most influential missionary and writer in all of church history. He will shape much of the Bible and how we today think about our faith.

We read Saul's story and it becomes the benchmark for us when we talk about conversion. There's such a drastic change in him and his encounter with Jesus is so clear that we see it up as the ideal. We judge the validity of our own experiences in light of what Saul went through. And that can be very disappointing.

Langston Hughes gives a very honest and touching account of having those kinds of expectations in his short story Salvation. I'd like to read part of it for you.

I was saved from sin when I was going on thirteen. But not really saved. It happened like this. There was a big revival at my Auntie Reed's church. Then just before the revival ended, they held a special meeting for children, "to bring the young lambs to the fold." That night I was escorted to the front row and placed on the mourners' bench with all the other young sinners, who had not yet been brought to Jesus.

My aunt told me that when you were saved you saw a light, and something happened to you inside! And Jesus came into your life! And God was with you from then on! She said you could see and hear and feel Jesus in your soul. So I sat there calmly in the hot, crowded church, waiting for Jesus to come to me.

The preacher preached a wonderful rhythmical sermon, then he said: "Won't you come? Won't you come to Jesus? Young lambs, won't you come?" And he held out his arms to all us young sinners there on the mourners' bench. And the little girls cried. And some of them jumped up and went to Jesus right away. Still I kept waiting to see Jesus.

Finally all the young people had gone to the altar and were saved, but one boy and me. He was a rounder's son named Westley. Westley and I were surrounded by sisters and deacons praying. It was very hot in the church, and getting late now. Finally Westley said

to me in a whisper: "I'm tired o' sitting here. Let's get up and be saved." So he got up and was saved.

Then I was left all alone on the mourners' bench. My aunt came and knelt at my knees and cried, while prayers and song swirled all around me in the little church. And I kept waiting serenely for Jesus, waiting, waiting - but he didn't come. I wanted to see him, but nothing happened to me. Nothing! I wanted something to happen to me, but nothing happened.

Now it was really getting late. I began to be ashamed of myself, holding everything up so long. I began to wonder what God thought about Westley, who certainly hadn't seen Jesus either, but who was now sitting proudly on the platform, swinging his legs and grinning down at me, surrounded by deacons and old women on their knees praying. God had not struck Westley dead for taking his name in vain or for lying in the temple. So I decided that maybe to save further trouble, I'd better lie, too, and say that Jesus had come, and get up and be saved. So I got up.

Suddenly the whole room broke into a sea of shouting, as they saw me rise. Waves of rejoicing swept the place. My aunt threw her arms around me. The minister took me by the hand and led me to the platform.

That night, for the first time in my life but one -- I cried. I cried, in bed alone, and couldn't stop. I buried my head under the quilts, but my aunt heard me. She woke up and told my uncle I was crying because the Holy Ghost had come into my life, and because I had seen Jesus. But I was really crying because I couldn't bear to tell her that I had lied, that I had deceived everybody in the church, that I hadn't seen Jesus, and that now I didn't believe there was a Jesus anymore, since he didn't come to help me.

That's such a sad story to me – not because he didn't see Jesus, but because that's what had been built up in his mind as salvation. He was waiting for a certain experience and it wasn't happening. That only left him the option of pretending something had happened or sitting on that bench forever. The wrong idea of what it looks like to come to faith can have the same effect on all of us. We either manufacture an experience to be what we imagine it should look like, or we can't ever bring ourselves to believe because we aren't feeling what we think we should feel if it's real.

The truth is that most of us don't have a big lightning bolt moment like Saul. Faith seems like it would be much easier if we had that kind of Damascus road experience – something so tangible that we would know for sure God is real. But Saul was the exception.

I certainly didn't have anything like that. I came to faith when I was very young. As I got older, I felt the need to "repray the prayer" to Jesus over and over because I didn't have anything dramatic to point to and say "That's when I became a Christian." It took me a long time to realize that God brings us to himself in all kinds of ways, and most of them aren't dramatic at all.

So if we're looking at this story of Saul as some sort of standard for what a real conversion experience should look like, we're going to be let down. Voices and visions are great, but they're rare.

And here's the thing: I don't even think Saul's conversion happened the way we remember it. Luke got the story right – I just think as readers, we focus on the wrong part of it. The spectacularness of the moment can overshadow what was really going on. My goal for this morning is to take us beyond the circumstances to see some deeper aspects of conversion that apply to all of us and not just Saul.

Let's get back to the question I asked earlier: What do we mean by conversion? For a word that's thrown around a lot, it's not one we define very often. Maybe it helps first to talk about what it doesn't mean:

- Starting to go to church
- Praying some magic words
- Going through confirmation
- Being baptized
- A warm feeling in your heart

Those can all be significant moments for people, but not a way to measure a conversion. Ben Witherington wrote what I think is a good definition. Here's part of it:

By conversion, we mean the reorientation of a soul of an individual.

Reorientation makes me think of the sport of orienteering. The Heaths could tell you way more about that than I could, but essentially it's a race where you use a map and a compass to find your way. Imagine in the middle of a race if you suddenly realize something was wrong with your compass and it was pointing south instead of north. You would have to rethink everything you were doing and head in a different direction.

That's conversion. It's a turning, and it could be from another belief system, or skepticism or indifference. It's turning and pointing yourself toward Christ. You see true north in a different place and consciously adjust your life according to your new bearings.

Saul had no intention of converting to anything. Imagine drawing a line. At one end you write "conversion." Right next to that on the line, you could have a picture of the Ethiopian eunuch saying "Help me." He's ready to take that step. Then, as the line stretches out a little further, you would have someone who says, "I'm not sure." Then a little further out you'd have the person who thinks, "I don't believe this and I don't care." Then a little further out there, you might have the person who thinks "Christians are idiots." Finally, way out at the very end of the line, you'd have Saul saying, "Mention Jesus to me and I'll punch you in the face."

He was on the warpath against the church. When Luke says he was breathing out murderous threats, you get this image of a bull about ready to charge, smoke coming out of his nose. He hates everything Jesus stands for.

But that's not how God sees us or conversion. He's as close to the last person on that line as he is to the first person. We don't have to move further down the line inch by inch before encountering God. God is ready to grab our hearts at any time.

Isaiah 59:1

Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save,

Nobody is out of reach of God's arm. Donald Biermann knows that. He's an inmate in Angola prison in Louisiana, known as America's bloodiest prison. His yard nickname is Carolina, and he's serving a life sentence without possibility of parole. Carolina was one of the most violent inmates in the prison, and he was getting ready to commit his most violent act yet. But before he did it, he tagged along to a three day, in-prison ministry retreat. He went for the food, because he knew it would be his last chance at food from the outside world for a long, long time. He had no interest in God. His words were, "I thought God was a fairy tale and anyone who believed in him was a fairy." Pretty close down there to the Saul end of the spectrum.

A day into the retreat with these Christians and Carolina was ready to leave. He started to get really agitated, so much so that the facilitator started to panic. Then, Carolina says, "With no prayer, no blinding lights or trumpets, God just took the violence and bitterness right out of my heart. I knew it was gone because I'd lived with it for forty-four years. I thought I'd lost my mind...Then I heard Jesus say, 'I love you.' It sounded like words from speakers at a concert. In every joint of my body I felt Jesus say, 'I love you.' I started crying and I cried for two weeks. I hadn't cried since I was seven years old."

God is just as close to the inmates of Angola prison as he is to us here today. You're always within his reach. The arm of the Lord was not too short to reach Carolina. God was close enough to whisper "I love you" and when he did, it shook that man to the core.

Is there someone you've given up hope for, feeling they're too impossible for God to connect with? Grace says we don't have to do anything to deserve God's love, and no matter how far we may seem to be from pursuing him, God can still pursue us.

Let's get back to Saul. We like to think what happened to him there on the road would be a wonderful memory, but at that moment, it was devastating. It's fitting that he was knocked to the ground physically, because meeting Jesus that way flattened him spiritually.

Imagine that you're a soldier in Afghanistan and you've been searching for months to find Osama bin Laden, and your orders are to shoot him and any of his followers if you see them. Then one day he shows up to you unexpectedly and reveals to you that you

had it all wrong: he's not evil after all – he's the good guy and you've been the one doing evil by hunting him down.

Hard to wrap your mind around that one, isn't it? And yet that's how radical of a shift it was for Paul to embrace Jesus. In an instant, his entire belief system was turned on its head. That's not a moment to celebrate – that's a crisis. What do you do when you think you've been working in the name of God and the whole time you've been attacking him?

Reorientation starts with a faith crisis. Old beliefs have to somehow be called into question. You don't turn away from your core beliefs unless some doubt has been cast on them. Paul had based his life and actions on certain understandings of God the Father and Jesus, and in that one moment all of his assumptions were knocked out.

Tom Wright describes the moment like this: “Suddenly Saul's world turned upside down and inside out. Terror, ruin, shame, awe, horror, glory and terror again swept over him...It confirmed everything Saul had been taught; it overturned everything he had been taught.”

Events in our own lives can spark a faith crisis. A tragedy, a loss or a major change in our circumstances can affect what we believe. One friend of mine watched his dad die of cancer and felt like it completely wiped out what he thought he knew about God. When our world is overturned and our faith is in crisis, it can feel like it is moving us further away from God, because we start questioning things we used to take for granted about him. There's a vacuum and a loss that feels like the death of faith. But that can be God's way of breaking us free from distorted images of him to something new.

There's a university chaplain at a Christian school, and students will come to him sometimes and say, “I don't believe in God,” expecting him to be shocked. His response is, “Tell me about the God you don't believe in. I probably don't believe in him either.”

Faulty conceptions of God need to be shaken and toppled before true faith can take its place. If you've been struggling with doubts, look more closely at the God you're having trouble believing in. Maybe the true God is rattling things loose in your heart. Doubts are not a reason to give up on faith – they're the clue that tells you there's something more to dig for.

Saul was shaken. He was blasted to the ground by the intense glare of the light and the volume of the voice. And then he responds:

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

Suddenly he no longer has all the answers. Paul later wrote about all the things he had been so proud about in his religious upbringing. He thought he had a lock on God and knew him well. He had a smug confidence when it came to matters of faith.

Now he's been jolted out of his arrogance about God. That's a healthy side effect of a faith crisis: **The crisis leads to a question.**

"Who are you Lord?" Nothing could be a better, more receptive question. And Saul lets God be the one to answer it. He hears with fresh ears what he's been trying to tune out.

Do we really want to know who God is? Sometimes we have what I would call a fake faith crisis. We step away from belief because we don't want to hear God's answer about who he is. Living in doubt lets us not be accountable to a holy God. Keeping the cross a safe distance away means my sins won't have to get nailed to it and I won't have to change.

For other people, though, the crisis is very real and very messy. A disbelief can set in so deeply that we don't even care to try anymore. But when we reach the point where we can genuinely ask "Who are you Lord?" and want to know, that's one question we can count on God to answer. He made this statement in the book of Proverbs:

Prov 8:17

...those who seek me find me.

God wants to be found. He stands ready to answer. Are we ready to ask, "Who are you?" Saul opens himself up to whatever God wants to say, and gets a pretty stern response. "I'm Jesus. I'm the one you're persecuting. Now get up off the ground. I've got work for you."

The answer leads to movement.

At this point Saul is confused. He's physically blind and his mind must have been reeling. And this is what I think we miss when we remember Saul's conversion. It wasn't quite as instantaneous as we might have believed. The sights and sounds were definitely miraculous, but Saul still had to process this just like anybody else would. God didn't transform him on the spot. Saul goes through a transition period.

I would have been in a panic about that time. To be suddenly blind and have everything I'd been working for prove false? I don't know if I would have had the presence of mind to do anything but melt down in a puddle there in the street.

But God is moving him. He's not letting him just wallow in his crisis – he's moving him toward himself as he moves him into Damascus. He's getting him to a spot where the next stage of his faith can kick in. Saul obeys God's instruction to get up and walk into town.

When we're calling out to God to speak to us, he often says, "Get up." There may be an action step we need to take so that we'll be in place for what he wants to do next. We may need to be repositioned see more clearly.

I've read this George MacDonald quote before, but it's so good I want to repeat it. This is his advice about what to do when we are in a place of waiting to hear God's voice:

Fold the arms of your faith, and wait in the quietness until light goes up in your darkness. Fold the arms of your faith, I say, but not of your action: think of something that you ought to do, and, go to do it, if it be but the sweeping of a room, or the preparing of a meal, or a visit to a friend. Heed not your feeling: Do your work.

Maybe God hasn't fully revealed himself to you. Maybe you're still feeling dazed and confused like Saul. I would encourage you not to let your skepticism paralyze you. The old saying that it's easier to steer a moving ship is true. God may just be saying to you "Get up. Take the step first – sight will come later."

When Saul gets to Damascus, Luke shifts his attention to a Christian in that city named Ananias.

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Ananias was in need of his own reorientation at this point. He knows Saul's reputation, and he knows why he was coming to town. To go pray for the man seems like a suicide mission. And yet God needed him to go and be part of what he was doing in Saul's life. Thankfully, Ananias went ahead and did what God asked.

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord-Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here-has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

The friend leads to grace

Here is where I believe we can point to the real conversion of Saul. It didn't happen back there on the road – it happened quietly in this living room, as this man Saul had come to arrest shows him an incredible act of kindness and love.

Put yourself in Saul's place. You are feeling completely vulnerable in your own private darkness. You don't know where you are or who's coming in the room. All you know is that it is someone you had planned to arrest, and now he's got complete control. What will he do to you? You hear his steps as he approaches. You flinch as he places his hand on your shoulder. But it's a kind, gentle hand with a quiet authority to it. And then you hear his voice, and he's praying – praying for YOU! He's referring to you as brother and praying that your blindness will go away. What's happening? Suddenly the scales fall away and you can see. You feel the energy of the Holy Spirit flooding you, forgiving you. This man has helped heal your heart in ways you never could have imagined.

It's no accident that the name Ananias means "The Lord is gracious." Ananias was the very picture of grace. God could have sealed the deal with Saul one on one, out in the street. But he chose instead to show his grace most clearly through another person. And that's usually how he chooses to work.

Rick Richardson says, "Most people today do not "decide" to believe. In community they "discover" that they believe, and then they decide to affirm that publicly and follow Christ intentionally."

When he was first starting to work with InterVarsity Fellowship at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he caught a glimpse of that firsthand. This small group of Christian freshman was trying to find a way to reach their friends, but quite honestly, there was nothing very exciting happening in their gatherings. The large group meetings were boring, the small groups were chaotic and weak.

Finally, one student named Peter said, "I'm going to bring my friend Richard to our prayer meeting. That's the only thing that seems authentic about what we're doing."

Rick was an atheist and a total pothead. The other students weren't too sure about the idea. They said, "He's going to feel weird at a prayer meeting. We're going to feel weird."

But Peter brought Richard anyway. And it first it was awkward. But after a while the freshman started praying like normal.

At the end, Richard came up to Peter and Rick and said "What was that?"

They said, "What was what?"

And Richard said, "I don't even believe in God, but God was in that room. What just happened?"

And right then and there, Rick was able to talk to him about Jesus and invite him to respond. Which he did that night. Rick said, “What convinced him? A group of struggling, authentic, accepting freshman who had learned to be people of the Presence.”

People of the presence demonstrate in the way they live that God is gracious. God is looking for communities of Ananias types who are willing to love and lead people into the faith.

Derek sent me this picture this week. It's called a power aware cord. It gives off a light when power goes through it. The cord itself isn't aware – it's just doing what a cord does. But it makes people aware of the power when they see it.

As Christians, the power of Christ is intended to be light through us that makes other people notice. We're often like that cord and completely unaware of it ourselves. But there's so much potential to impact lives like Richard's when we let that power shine through.

Let me speak for just a moment to those of you who may be wrestling with your own conversion (or lack thereof) this morning. When you're going through a faith crisis, it can be depressing and stressful and disorienting. Those kinds of feelings can make you want to withdraw and pull away from a believing community. You may feel like you're being a phony by hanging around with them. You may feel like their beliefs are too far from yours. But Jesus said when there's even a small gathering of people in his name, he shows up. If you're wanting to find the truth about God, that's your best chance of seeing Jesus.

Saul finally is flooded with the grace that changes him. His true conversion is now complete. Sort of.

Part of what God promised is that Saul is going to have a lifetime of learning ahead of him, and that he has a mission to the world.

The grace leads to life

Conversion is really just a first step in a long line of steps. In fact, you could think of your journey with God as being full of conversions – times where he flattens us, challenges our thinking, causes us to ask more about him, moving us and drawing us closer to himself through his people.

But the changes aren't just for our personal improvement – God changes us to be like that power cord ourselves and take his light into the world. God took everything that Saul had been – his knowledge of Scripture, his passion, his dedication – he took all that and reformed it, knowing it would serve him well in reaching the world.

Your conversion, your reorientation isn't just for the saving of your soul. God has much bigger plans in mind for you. Your life itself becomes a vehicle of grace to other people. As his power goes to work changing you, it's seen by the rest of the world.

Are you ready to be reoriented? No matter where you're at with faith, we all need reorientation – in how we see other people, how we see ourselves, how we see God. Or we need reorientation in how we live and we need to start moving.

Some of you are sensing in your heart this morning that this is the day to make a move toward God. You can find him. You can know him. He's in this place and in his people. What are you going to do? Are you ready to ask "Who are you Lord?"

Maybe your conversion seems like ancient history in your own experience, but you know God has some things to knock down in your life. God can refresh your soul and fuel that fire inside.

Today can be a day when scales fall away, when his Spirit fills you up, when you regain your strength like Saul.