

I would like you to think back and remember a time in your life when who you were and where you were headed completely changed. When something happened to you that altered the trajectory of your life. I've had several such moments in my life.

There was the death of my father when I was a child. There was changing my college major, from a B.S. in Biochemistry to a B.A. in English Literature. There was the decision to go to seminary. There was asking my wife to marry me. There was the birth of our daughter.

All of these moments changed my life. I was heading in one direction, with one purpose in life. And then, quite suddenly, I was heading in a different direction, with a different purpose in life. Maybe the same thing has happened to you.

The apostle Paul could certainly name such a time. Although “Paul” is his Greek name, the name he started using when he was traveling through Greece. We hear about him today with his Hebrew name of “Saul.”

Saul wants to eradicate the church. And he starts wreaking havoc on those who follow the way of Jesus shortly after Christ's resurrection. He's bound and determined to find every last Christian and have them thrown into jail or murdered.

When Stephen proclaims how the Old Testament is fulfilled in Jesus and his resurrection, Saul listens, but with hatred in his heart. When the stones rain down on Stephen, making him the first martyr of the church, Saul nods his head in agreement.

Then comes this defining moment of his life. He's traveling to Damascus, papers in hand to arrest anyone who claims Jesus as Lord and Savior. Suddenly, a blinding light flashes, and Saul comes face to face with Jesus: “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*” Saul can only ask, “*Who are you, Lord?*” And Saul hears words that will change him forever. “*I am Jesus.*”

Imagine how those words must have stung when Saul heard them. “*I am Jesus,*” the voice continues, “*whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.*”

Saul can't see. He has to be led into Damascus. For three days, he waits. For three days, he fasts. For three days, he remembers all that he has done to ravage the church. But maybe most importantly, for three days, those words – “I am Jesus” – penetrate every thought and feeling and bone in his body. It will be the defining moment of his life.

Because the man he believed was a false prophet is alive, though he was once dead. The supposed heretic that he has ardently denied time and time again, is speaking to him from heaven. The savior whose salvation he has repeatedly rejected has now come to save him.

And Saul's well-trained, theologically astute mind begins to race. The Old Testament comes alive like never before as he realizes all the prophecies have been fulfilled in Jesus. Stephen's testimony comes back to haunt him, but also to give him life. And he must know that everything is about to change. He couldn't yet know just how it would change, but the Lord will soon let him know.

Ananias arrives. He lays his hands on Saul. His eyesight is restored. He is filled with the Holy Spirit. He is baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus. He eats. He is strengthened by food and, perhaps even more, by the welcome from Ananias. From someone who once feared him and whom he had hated, Saul hears another Word from the Lord: “*Brother.*”

That's right. Ananias calls him “*Brother Saul.*” He proclaims that Saul is a brother in the faith. A fellow disciple of Jesus Christ. Saul has joined the church.

It's ironic: Saul's purpose in going to Damascus was to deliver letters authorizing the arrest of Christians by the chief priest. But now Saul will become best known for writing letters preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Letters upon which the church has relied and will rely until Jesus comes again.

A man who brought such suffering to the church will now suffer for the name of Jesus. A man who arrested believers will now be arrested time and time again. A man who was zealous to destroy the church will now plant churches in city after city.

A man who was hated and feared will now be welcomed as an apostle of Christ. A man who depended on what he did and his family background to be right with God will learn to depend solely on Christ for his righteousness. The list could go on. Those simple words changed everything for Saul: "I am Jesus." Saul met the resurrected Jesus, alive and glorified, and everything changed.

Now, none of us will have that same dramatic experience that Saul had. But we are still changed by the risen Jesus. And in a very similar way. Saul needed forgiveness. He needed to repent. He needed faith. He needed Jesus. He certainly needed all this for what he had done to the church before his conversion.

But even after that visit by Ananias, we can't put Saul on a pedestal. We can't make him a perfect, pious saint. When he wrote the letter to the Romans many years later, he confessed that the good he wanted to do, he still didn't always do. The evil he wanted to avoid, sometimes he ended up doing anyway. He wanted to delight in God's Law, but the law of sin still plagued him. In fact, Paul proclaims that he is a wretched man and asks, "*Who will save him from this body of death?*"

But now, Paul knows who that savior is. He knows that Jesus has died for the sins of the whole world. So he answers his own question. "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" And with absolute confidence in his forgiveness, he declares, "*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*"

We are no different than Paul, in this way. We need to repent. We need faith. We need forgiveness. We need Jesus. Every day.

There's a funny story I once heard of a little boy in a Lutheran church years ago. And every Sunday, he would go to church with his parents. And he would loudly say with the congregation: "I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto You all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended You and justly deserved Your temporal and eternal punishment. But I am "hardly" sorry for them."

Not "heartily." Hardly. He was hardly sorry for his sins. That changes the confession a little bit. And although he was making an innocent, honest mistake, the truth is that there are plenty of people who step in to Lutheran churches every Sunday. And they really are "hardly" sorry for their sins.

You know, we have a time of silence when we do the confession and absolution. It's there as a moment to reflect on the sins we have committed. To bring them to mind and make specific confession of them. There are plenty of other sins we have committed throughout the week that we don't remember, no doubt. But we reflect on these, nonetheless, as a reminder: we really are sinful and unclean. We do really, really, really need Jesus.

That was what changed Saul on the road to Damascus. Not just hearing, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." But also finding out from Ananias, "I am Jesus and there is therefore now no condemnation for you because you are in me."

You need Jesus, risen from the dead, to forgive you. I do too. And remember, if Jesus forgave Saul, who tried to destroy the church, and no longer condemned him, then He forgives you for whatever haunts you. If Jesus forgave Peter, who denied him three times, and invited him to feed his sheep once again, then He forgives you for whatever sin you've committed.

John declares, "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" Whatever you heartily confess is forgiven. Whatever you heartily confess is condemned no more.

You know, I perhaps wasn't quite accurate when I said we haven't had a dramatic experience like Saul did that changed his whole life. Actually, for many of us, we did. Not in the same way as Saul had that day. There was no blinding light. No words we could hear Jesus speak in his own voice from heaven. No seeing Jesus face to face as the glorified risen Lord of all. But we did meet Jesus, and he spoke to us in a way that changed the whole trajectory of our lives.

It happened at our Baptism. And in that moment of simple water and the Word, we heard a message from heaven. A message from our Lord, saying, "I am Jesus. And you are mine." And that changed our lives forever. Amen.