

"When You Get Knocked Off Your Horse"

Sermon Series on *The Way of the Spirit*

Dr. Peter B. Barnes

April 12, 2015

(Acts 9:1-22)

Introduction.

Since my wife Lorie was diagnosed with cancer back in January, God has given us two companions for this difficult journey who are members in our congregation – Stephen Anderson and Mark Hoppe. Both of them also have multiple myeloma, and each has been an invaluable help to both Lorie and me to learn about the disease, what to expect with the treatments, and how to cope with the side effects of the chemo therapy.

A couple of weeks after Lorie was diagnosed, Mark contacted her and asked, “What’s your hat size?”

Lorie answered, “Well, I don’t know. Why?”

Mark answered, “Because I’m going to get you a cowboy hat. You’re now a member of a special club with Stephen and me, and each of us has a hat. It’s not that you’re ever going to wear the hat. But it’s so that, whenever you get bucked off your horse because of this cancer, you can get back up, dust yourself off, put on your hat again, and get back on the horse and keep on going.”

Lorie and I loved that! It’s that kind of humor which both Mark and Stephen have given us which has helped us deal with this big challenge and the change in our lives.

All of us have had times when we’ve been knocked off our horse, haven’t we? We experienced a major setback, or the death of a dream. We got cut from the team, or we didn’t get accepted to the college we were hoping to attend. Someone broke our heart, or the deal fell through. Things were going along so well, and then, bam!, we get knocked off our horse.

Saul, who would later become known as the apostle Paul, knew something about this kind of experience because it happened to him when he was on the road to Damascus. Along the way he experienced a profound change, and his life would never be the same again.

I. The Purpose of Saul's Journey.

The text tells us that *"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"* (9:1,2).

Luke has already mentioned Saul twice in his book so far, and each time he’s presented as a bitter opponent of Jesus Christ and His followers. Luke tells us that Saul was there giving his approval to Stephen's death when an angry mob hurled rocks at him and killed him. Luke then tells us in chapter 8 that Saul began to destroy the Church, making a house-to-house search for followers of Christ, and he dragged them off to prison. Now Luke continues Saul's story by saying that he was breathing out murderous threats.

Saul wanted to pursue fugitive believers who had fled from Jerusalem to Damascus and extradite them to stand trial. There were several synagogues in Damascus which served a large Jewish population, so he left Jerusalem with written authority from the high priest to these

synagogues so that if he found anyone who belonged to “the Way,” which was an early reference to what Christians were called, he could take them as prisoners and bring them back.

Saul wasn't interested in the claims of Jesus. His heart was filled with hatred, and later in Acts 26 he would say that a raging fury obsessed him (26:11). If we had met Saul as he left Jerusalem and told him that before he reached Damascus he would too become a follower of Jesus, he would have said, “You're crazy!” But Saul was in for quite a surprise when he got knocked off his horse. As John Calvin once observed, we can see God's amazing grace “not only in such a cruel wolf being turned into a sheep, but also [later] in his assuming the character of a shepherd.”¹

There are times in our lives when we think we're doing God's will, but later on we discover we were completely mistaken. We're filled with zeal and even feel a bit self-righteous only to discover that we've spiritualized our own prejudices, and we've been missing the mark altogether. That was Saul's problem – zeal without knowledge. But on the road to Damascus God set him straight.

II. The Events of Saul's Journey.

If we put together the three accounts of this event in the book of Acts (here and in chapters 22 and 26), we discover that Saul and his companions, perhaps members of the temple police, set out from Jerusalem to go to Damascus. It was a journey of about 150 miles, and it would have taken almost a week to travel the distance. As they neared the city around noon, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around them, and Saul was knocked to the ground. A voice called out and said, “*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?*”

Saul asked, “*Who are you, Lord?*”

The voice answered, “*I am Jesus, who you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city. You will be told what you must do*” (Acts 9:3-6).

The people traveling with Saul were speechless. They heard the sound, but they didn't see anyone. When Saul got up, he was blind. So the men with him had to lead him by the hand into the city, and for three days he didn't eat or drink a thing.

Saul believed he was doing God's will. He thought he had it all figured out. He knew where he was headed, and he wasn't about to let anyone get in his way. But on the road to Damascus, God stopped him dead in his tracks. Instead of coming to Damascus to arrest Christians, Saul found himself arrested by Christ whose light blinded his eyes but shone in his heart for the first time, and it swept over him like a flood.

There are times in our lives when God interrupts everything, and we are pulled up short. Unwanted change or a moment of crisis comes, and it causes everything to come to an abrupt halt. We can't see straight, and we lose our bearings. We're blind to the future, and we don't know where to go. And someone has to lead us by the hand to show us the way.

Has this happened to you recently? Has God interrupted your life? Whenever this has happened to me, I always find that I'm more open to God than ever before, and He has my attention in a brand new way. All the props in my life have been pulled out from under me, and in this helpless state God shows up and He speaks. Because of what's happened, I'm all ears, and I begin to listen and hear God's voice.

III. The Effect of Saul's Journey.

Luke tells us what happened in Damascus when Saul arrived. The author turns from the causes of Saul's conversion to the consequences of this dramatic experience, and we see a

transformation in the attitude and character on the man which had an immediate impact. Saul's relationship with God was transformed, and he fasted and prayed for three days and gained a new reverence for Jesus. His relationship with Christians was affected, too, and Ananias spoke words of healing as he placed his hands on Saul and gently said, "Saul, my brother." And Saul's experience affected an unbelieving world. Immediately he began to proclaim in the synagogues that Jesus was the Son of God, and he confounded the Jews with his persuasive arguments.

The effect of Saul's conversion was powerful. He would never be the same again. This Jewish rabbi, a Pharisee of the Pharisees and former destroyer of the Church, would go on to become the greatest missionary in church history, and he would write nearly half of the books of the New Testament and serve as the primary architect of Christian theology. In the end, Saul would take the gospel to the halls of power in the capital city of the Roman Empire, where eventually he was martyred for his faith.

When you study Saul's conversion, it becomes apparent that he made three discoveries when he got knocked off his horse. The **first discovery was just how lost he really was**. Saul was a man who thought he had great self-awareness. He believed he knew who he was and where he was going. He thought that he had it all together, and he was convinced he was headed in the right direction. But when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, he came to realize he really was a very lost person.

The **second discovery** Saul made was that **Jesus was in fact alive**. Until now he was convinced that the crucifixion of Jesus had put an end to this false prophet from Nazareth, but on the road to Damascus Saul discovered that the risen Christ was in fact alive. Jesus spoke to Saul, and Saul spoke to Jesus.

You may recall that last week as we celebrated Easter and the Resurrection, I asked you if you knew Jesus is alive today. I also asked if you had ever heard Him call your name like Mary did just after the Resurrection. Many people come to church every Sunday and act like what we are doing here in worship as Christians is simply remembering the life and words of a dead man. But whenever you hear Jesus call your name and you realize that He is in fact alive, that's when your life takes on a whole new excitement in the adventure of developing a relationship of trust and love with a living Person in the power of God's Holy Spirit.

The other aspect of this new discovery Saul made was that Jesus is also alive in His people. Jesus asked Saul, "Why are you persecuting me?" Saul could have replied, "I'm not persecuting You, Jesus. I'm just trying to arrest the people who claim to be Your followers." But the Lord said, "I am Jesus who you are persecuting." Saul began to see that to persecute the followers of Jesus is to persecute Christ Himself.

I believe this is when Saul probably had his first insight into the organic union between Jesus and His followers, and he came to understand that the Church is actually the body of Christ. Later on he would write about this at length in his letters, but it was on the road to Damascus that he first had this insight.

The **final discovery** Saul made was **he had a mission to do**. "You will be told what you must do," Jesus said. Saul thought he already had a mission, and he believed he was on the right path. But he was dead wrong, and it wasn't the mission God wanted him to accomplish. He was doing what he wanted, and Jesus made it clear that now he would be told what he must do.

Have you made these three discoveries yourself? Do you realize just how lost you are without Christ? Are you aware that Jesus really is alive today and He wants to be active in your life? And are you prepared to accept whatever mission God gives you to do as you seek to follow Him in the coming week?

Some of us can name the day and the time when we made a decision to give our lives to Christ. We had a Damascus Road experience like Saul did, and we can mark the moment. Others of us can't point to a specific time when we became a Christian, and we just grew up in the faith and never questioned a belief in God or the truth of Christianity. But all of us who claim to be followers of Jesus need to make these three discoveries ourselves along the way if we want to experience the life God promises. And that can happen all at once or gradually over the course of one's entire life.

IV. A Story of Discovery.

My friend Craig Barnes once made these discoveries himself, and he writes about it in his excellent book *When God Interrupts*, which I highly recommend.² Shortly before his seventeenth birthday, Craig and his brother came home from the camps where they had been working for the summer only to learn that their parents were divorcing. His mother had already left home, and shortly thereafter his dad did too. Soon Craig and his brother were on their own with no one.

The Christmas after their parents split up, Craig and his brother wanted to visit their mom. They didn't have enough money to make the trip on a bus, so they decided to hitchhike. If the rides went well, they figured they could make it in a couple of days. The rides didn't go well. It got dark. It began to snow. And there were fewer and fewer cars on the highway.

When they were young, their father forced them to memorize Scripture. Craig could never quite understand the purpose of it, since there seemed to be little threat that the "godless communists" were going to take away their Bibles, as his father warned. Oftentimes they would get quizzed on their verses. Their dad would toss out a Bible reference, and they would have to recite the text.

Craig did it because he was told it was important, and because everyone he admired in their small church did it. But mostly he did it because he had to. As the years piled up, so did the verses he memorized. He looks back now and says, "I had God tucked away in the corners of my mind. Just give me the reference, and I could reproduce Him for anyone."

Standing on the side of that road, as the night got darker and the snow fell harder, Craig and his brother started talking about what in the world had happened to them. After a while they couldn't talk about it anymore. It was just too hard. So to keep their minds off the cold, and maybe to remind themselves of the home they lost, they started quizzing each other on the memory verses. Back and forth they went.

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and lean not on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
and He will make your paths straight (Pr. 3:5).*

We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose (Rm. 8:28).

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, plans to give you a future with hope (Jer. 29:11).

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, and you are mine.*

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you;
when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...
You are precious in my sight,
And honored, and I love you (Is. 43:1-4).*

That night for the first time in his life Craig heard those verses not just with his ears but in his heart. Maybe it was because now he was ready to hear them. He was confused, frightened and grieving over the loss of everything that had once held his world together. He got knocked off his horse, and he knew he was lost and needed a Savior.

For Saul it happened on the road to Damascus. For Craig it happened on Interstate 81, and he came to believe that he was precious to God. That evening he began as a lost teenager on the side of the road, but after hearing God's Word to him, Craig knew his life had been found and he had a new purpose.

Conclusion.

Has your world been blown apart recently? Is God trying to get your attention? How will you respond? Have you been headed in the wrong direction, and does the Lord want you to turn around and go a new way? Learn from the life of Saul, and ask the Lord what He wants you to do. I've learned that conversion is really a life-long experience, not just a once-in-a-lifetime deal. It doesn't just happen when you first come to Jesus. It's something God does throughout your life, and often He knocks you off your horse to help you take the next step of trusting Him.

Will you be an Ananias to someone this week? Who is there you know that needs a healing touch or a healing word? Ananias pushed past his fears and reservations about Saul, and he laid his hands on this broken man, healed him of his blindness, and spoke the gentle words, "Saul, my brother." Who needs to hear those words from you this week?

I began my message talking about Mark Hoppe and cowboy hats. I wish I had a hat to give everyone here today, because at some point in your life you're going to get knocked off your horse. And you, too, will need to get up, dust yourself off, put on your hat, and keep on riding. With Jesus as our companion, guide, and Friend, He'll help us do that no matter how hard the horse may buck. That is something a man named Saul of Tarsus learned on the road to Damascus. Amen.

¹John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. I, p. 256.

²M. Craig Barnes, *When God Interrupts*, pp. 32-34.