

Shame and Salvation

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Today's lesson is about the apostle Paul's experience on the Damascus Road. Before we begin, I want to address something that may have confused you over the years. Paul is sometimes referred to as Saul. That's true in our lesson for today. Is there any significance to this? No. Saul is just a variation of the name Paul. It's like someone can be named William, but we can also call him Bill. Same thing.

And now that we know that little tidbit, let's read our lesson for today!

Acts 9:1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.

THE WORST THING

What is the worst thing you have ever done?

I know what you're thinking!

Some of you are thinking,

"The worst thing I've ever done ... I'm not so sure. There have been so many."

But, some of you are thinking,
“How did he know?”
Shame has a long shelf life.

In one church I served, a man told me about something that he did when he was just four years old. He was playing with matches one day and burned down the family home. Everyone got out okay, but the home was a total loss.

I knew the rest of this man’s family. Everyone in this family was elderly and they all loved this man very much. But, when this eighty year old man told this story, he blushed with shame. After seventy six years he still felt the shame of what he had done.

SHAME AND HONOR

I read a fascinating article in Christianity Today this past week. We think about sin and salvation in terms of breaking laws and being forgiven.

And certainly that’s part of the story.
All have sinned. Right?
We learn that early on in the church.

But, the Christianity Today article suggested that we should also think about the gospel in terms of shame and honor.

There are many cultures around the world that look at the world in this way. In the East people talk about “losing face”.
Morality is governed primarily by what others say about you.

That, to a certain extent is true in our culture, but much more so in other cultures.

SHAME AND THE CROSS

And this was primarily how the culture of Jesus’ day thought about things. The gospel is told primarily from the perspective of a shame/honor culture.

People might have guessed from the circumstances surrounding his arrest and crucifixion that Jesus was treated unfairly by the criminal justice system. Maybe he wasn't guilty.

But, there was no doubt about his shame.

Crucifixion was designed not just to kill someone but to totally humiliate them.

It was like those awful stories that come on the news sometimes, and I tell my wife, 'Turn that off. That's just too shameful to look at.'"

That was the cross.

It was the epitome of shame.

Everyone bowed their heads and looked away.

That's why in the Old Testament it was said that anyone who hangs on a tree is cursed. It was about shame. It was about losing face.

No one even associated with an event like this would ever be the same again. Shame has a long shelf life.

And then these disciples of Jesus start talking about the cross, this emblem of shame as a means of salvation. Death was not the end they said.

Thousands heard and believed this message.

Thousands were healed by this message.

THE CROSS REJECTED

But, many more thought that this was the most shameful message they had every heard.

How could someone humiliated in this way be the Messiah, let alone the Son of God?

It was "sacrilegious". Everyone knows that God rewards the righteous. Right?

The message of the cross had no place in orthodox theology. It was heresy.

And that's why the religious leaders not only rejected the message that the apostle's were preaching. It made their blood boil. It made them extremely angry.

Tell people today that salvation is by grace through faith and not by works, and some of them will become very angry. Even some Christians will reject this message.

They believe that salvation comes from hard work and doing the right thing. They think it's shameful to suggest that salvation is a gift from God. And it's especially shameful to think that something like the horror of the cross could be associated with that salvation.

That's why so many people today have trouble with the message of the cross.

They ask:

How could Jesus die for our sins on the cross?

Why do we spend so much time thinking about the meaning of the cross?

They would prefer to say that the cross was a terrible injustice, like so many injustices perpetrated today.

It would be better to think about what Jesus did and the message Jesus proclaimed instead of spending so much time at the cross.

I must admit that I have a hard time looking at the cross too.

I might be tempted to look away from the cross.

After all these years it is still shameful.

But, the whole New Testament tells the same story.

And all those stories point toward the cross.

I can ask my wife to turn off the TV when something shameful comes on.

But, I cannot turn off the message of the cross in the New Testament.

You either deal with the message of the cross or you decide not to be a Christian.

It's that simple.

PAUL'S REJECTION OF THE CROSS

Paul had no trouble rejecting the message of the cross.
He didn't care how much the apostle's talked about resurrection.
He didn't care how many people were healed.

For Paul, suggesting that Jesus was the Messiah was akin to Pilate placing the sign above Jesus as he was crucified: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

That sign not only brought shame on Jesus and his disciples.
That sign also brought shame on the Jewish nation.

The idea of a crucified Messiah was shameful.
And it had to be stopped.

Now don't think that Paul was a criminal.
He was a very religious person.
He was a Pharisee, and Pharisees tried to live a just and devout life.

Paul was also a great theologian.
He was trained by Gamaliel, one of the most respected rabbis in the ancient world.

Paul loved his country, and wanted the best for it.
And Paul was thoroughly convinced that the best thing for his religion and his country was to get rid of these crazy people who talked about a crucified Messiah.

So, he began to persecute the Christians.

STEPHEN

In fact, the first time we meet Paul in the New Testament, he is witnessing and approving of the persecution of Stephen.

Stephen, you may recall, was a deacon.
He was given the task along with some others of caring for the needy among the Christian community.

The Bible tells us that he was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.
And he did a great job as a deacon.
In fact his compassion became famous.

But, some people began to spread rumors about Stephen.
These false witnesses said that Stephen was saying bad things about the faith.
So some religious leaders and a crowd confronted Stephen about this.

And Stephen responded by preaching.
In brief he told the whole story of the Hebrew Bible.
Isn't it odd that a man who was supposedly saying bad things about the faith knew the story by heart?

But, then Stephen did what all the other apostles had done up to this point.
He told the rest of the story. He said,

“Solomon built a Temple, but God does not live in a Temple.
True faith is not about buildings and ritual.
True faith is about doing God's will, doing what is right and just in the world.

And you guys have been doing a really bad job of that.
In fact you have killed the prophets that God has sent you.
And most recently you have even killed the Righteous One.”

Once again this accusation did not go over well with the religious leaders.
They ground their teeth in anger.

In the meantime Stephen had a vision of the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. This was too much for them to bear, and they began to stone Stephen.

And while they stoned Stephen he prayed out loud,
“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”
And then he died.

PERSECUTION AND PROCLAMATION

You would think that Stephen forgiving his enemies as he was stoned to death would change some hearts. But, just the opposite happened.

Paul saw this as an opportunity.

He led a persecution so severe that those thousands of people changed by the Spirit of Christ were scattered all over the ancient world.

These Christians who had enjoyed the favor of the people were now put to shame.

Did these Christians slink off, ashamed of how they had been treated and reviled by their people?

Not at all.

They began to preach the gospel in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the ancient world.

Seems I've heard that somewhere before.

Once again God had flipped the script.

God used shame to bring about glory and honor.

The story of the cross was being retold in the lives of Jesus' disciples.

PERSECUTION ON THE ROAD

And all this made Paul madder than a wet hen.

It wasn't enough just to persecute Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul decided that he needed to persecute Christians wherever they were.

So, Paul asked the high priest for a letter of introduction to the synagogues in Damascus.

He figured that since the followers of Jesus met in the Temple in Jerusalem, that is where he would find them in Damascus. And if he found any Christians in Damascus, he would bind them and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial.

Notice that once again the Scripture notes that Paul intended to bind all the disciples of Jesus and bring them to trial, men and women. This is the second time the Scripture mentions this. Why is this important?

I would suggest that a male dominated society, being unable to protect you wife and your daughters from being led bound to Jerusalem for trial was something that was very shameful. Paul was determined to stamp out the Christians, and discredit them in any way he could.

ON THE WAY

You may have noticed that the followers of Christ aren't called Christians in this passage. They are called the people of the Way. This suggests that to follow Christ means to always be on the move.

That was certainly true for Jesus and his disciples in the gospel. They left their jobs and their families to follow Jesus. And they never stay too long in one place.

They are on the way to Jerusalem.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples are told to move out again.

Jesus will meet them in Galilee, just as he said he would.

The message does not stop at the tomb.

The risen Christ is ahead of them and calls to them to come.

And then, as we've mentioned before, just before his ascension Jesus told his disciples that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria and Judea and to the ends of the earth.

If you want to be a follower of Jesus, you have to be on the move.

Discipleship is not about standing still.

Discipleship is about responding to God's call in Christ.

In that sense we are still a people of the Way.

A CHANGE IN DIRECTION

And sometimes God even stops us in our tracks on that way and causes us to go in a different direction. That's Paul's story in our lesson for today.

Remember, Paul was a religious man.

Paul loved his country, and he loved his faith.

But, Paul did terrible things in the name of the country and the faith that he loved.

Paul was blind to what he was really doing.

And I wonder.

Are we sometimes blind to what we are really doing?

Maybe we haven't been complicit in murder as Paul was.
But, if we look back on our lives with an open heart, I think that many of us will be able to see that we too have, at one time or another, done bad things for religious reasons.

What can we do about it?
How can we repent of something if we think our cause is righteous?

Perhaps Paul should have listened more closely to his teacher, Gamaliel. Gamaliel counseled the religious leaders to have patience in regards to the people of the Way.
He said,

"Leave these people alone.
If this is a passing fad it will go away.
But, if this is from God, it will grow.
And if we oppose it we may even find ourselves opposing God!"

That's where Paul found himself on the road to Damascus.
He was going the wrong way.
He was opposing God.

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

And God intervened.
Like a bolt out of the blue God entered Paul's life through the voice of Christ.
And this presence put proud Paul on his knees.

And the voice of Jesus said,
"Paul, Paul why do you persecute me?"

Paul didn't recognize the voice of Jesus.
That's not surprising since Paul had never understood God to be working through Jesus.

But, now Jesus identifies himself.
He says, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

When you persecute the Lord's people, you are persecuting the Lord.
When you crucify the Lord's people, you are crucifying the Lord.

Did you ever wonder why God graciously chose to intervene in Paul's life? I think it was an answer to prayer. Remember what Stephen prayed as he was being killed?

"Lord, do not hold this sin against them." It sounds a whole lot like what Jesus said on the cross doesn't it? "Father forgive them."

Paul's life was turned around on the Damascus road that day. He was forgiven.

SHAME USED FOR SALVATION

But, there is more to it than that. Paul was given a whole new way of thinking about things. What he once thought was honorable (religion based on status and power) became shameful and what he once thought was shameful (the cross) now became a source of honor and glory.

Paul was forgiven on the day of his conversion, but this did not mean that Paul forgot about his shameful past. Two more times in the book of Acts the apostle Paul tells this same story. He tells how he persecuted the people of the Way and how a blinding light from heaven changed everything.

And yet, Paul never forgot the shame of what he had done before. Shame, you remember, has a long shelf life for all of us.

The difference in Paul's life was this: God in Christ turned the shame into glory.

God in Christ used persecution, murder and even crucifixion as a way to bring in the kingdom.

Persecution led to the gospel being proclaimed all over the world. And the persecutor in chief became the world's greatest evangelist.

That's why I have hope.

I have hope in times of persecution and pain.

I have hope even for the person who has committed a terrible wrong.

I have hope even for those of us whose view of grace is obscured.

I have hope even for those of us who are blinded by a foolish, wrong-headed religion.

Why? Because from time to time the sovereign God chooses to come into our life like a bolt out of the blue.

Like the apostle Paul we too can be turned inside out and upside down for the sake of the kingdom. We too can be blinded in order to truly see.

Even our shame can become a part of salvation's story.

Amen.