

"Mid-Course Correction"
Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

Acts 9:20-31

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²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" ²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. ^{a]}

²³ After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, ²⁴ but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. ²⁵ But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

²⁶ When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. ³⁰ When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

³¹ Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

Footnotes:

a. [Acts 9:22](#) Or *Messiah*

Introduction.

In American history there are words that have either been written or spoken which have been seared into the American consciousness, and they have become a part of our American vocabulary. For example,

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...."

"Four-score and seven years ago our forefathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation...."

"Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

In 1970, another saying became an American classic. It was when Jim Lovell, the captain of *Apollo 13* said the words, *"Houston, we have a problem."* The difficulty to which the astronaut referred was



caused by an explosion and a rupture of oxygen tank No. 2 in the service module of the space craft. The result was that the mission had to be scrapped. It became obvious very quickly that the crew would not complete its mission or make it to the moon after all, and there was serious question as to whether or not they would even be able to return to Earth.

The problem was that with the explosion the spacecraft was off course as it came around the moon and headed back toward Earth. A carefully executed mid-course correction was necessary, or the three astronauts aboard *Apollo 13* would die as they entered the Earth's atmosphere at a wrong angle and burned to a crisp. A correction of this kind was no small task given all the other problems, such as minimal electricity and unreliable computers. Remember, this was 1970! After some hasty but brilliant brainstorming, a 39-second "burn" of the thrusters was attempted, and the delicate process of getting the spacecraft on the right track was completed to perfection. The result was a safe splashdown in the Pacific Ocean, much to the relief of everyone who witnessed it live on television.

Gordon MacDonald has writtenⁱ in the world of space exploration, a mid-course correction is a refinement of the direction of the spacecraft so it will reach its intended destination. However, he suggests, the words "mid-course correction" have spiritual significance, too. There are times in our lives when we also need a mid-course correction to get us back on the right path with God.

Just ask Saul of Tarsus about what happened to him on the road to Damascus. Saul experienced a mid-course correction, which resulted in a profound reorientation to his whole way of life and led to a redirection of everything he did.

I. The Preaching of Saul.

You will recall last week we studied the first part of Acts 9 which describes Saul's remarkable conversion on the road to Damascus. He was on his way with letters from the Sanhedrin to the synagogues there to arrest followers of Christ in that city and extradite them back to Jerusalem to stand trial. However, as he neared Damascus, he was knocked to the ground by a flashing light, and he was struck blind. Jesus called out to him and asked, "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?*" Saul was led by the hand to Damascus where he stayed for three days during which time he ate and drank nothing. Then God sent Ananias to Saul to restore his sight and bring him into the family of faith.

This amazing event led to an amazing change, and we are told that immediately Saul began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus was the Christ. The antagonist became the protagonist. The persecutor became a proclaimer. Right from the start, Saul became a powerful witness and defender of the faith, and he was able to baffle the Jews living in Damascus with his persuasive arguments. Immediately he began to tell others about the change in his life.

James Boiceⁱⁱ has said the new birth in Christ is a lot like physical birth. When a baby is born, the first thing the infant does is cry. I remember when our oldest son Nate was born in Alexandria, Virginia. When he came out all scrunched up and messy with a ruddy color to him, the doctor didn't even have to touch him before he started to wail. The moment his lungs took in oxygen for the first time, he let out a cry from deep in his little soul. Lorie and I grinned from ear to ear, and we began to cry, too. A baby is supposed to cry when they are born; if they don't we know something is wrong.

The same is true spiritually. God's Word is planted in our hearts, either all at once, like what happened to Saul, or over a period of time, as happened with Timothy, and we have an encounter with God and are born again, as Jesus said to Nicodemus. Regardless of how you came to know Christ, at some point you should begin to cry out as a child of God. If you don't, then something is wrong. There comes a moment when you and I should begin to verbalize what God has done for us and demonstrate



that the Holy Spirit has truly taken up residence in our hearts. If we don't, we should wonder how real the new birth actually was.

This change should also show up not only in what we say but also in the way we live, and we should question our discipleship if you and I live just like we did before or just like the rest of the world around us does. After Saul's conversion, he experienced a profound change, and he turned around 180 degrees. Jesus was his new Lord and preaching became his new job, and he would never go back to his former way of life.

Where are you today? As a child of God, do you cry out and tell others the good things God has done for you, or has something got your tongue and kept you in silence? Are there things in your life which you know you need to stop doing because they are leading you down the wrong path, and what are the new things you need to start doing that will honor the Lord in a better way? Is it time for a mid-course correction in your life?

II. The Plot Against Saul.

It is not surprising that opposition arose against Saul. You will recall that when Ananias protested God's instructions to go to Saul after his conversion, the Lord told Ananias that Saul was His chosen instrument to carry the gospel to the Gentiles, but He also added, *"I will show [Saul] how much he must suffer for My name"* (9:16). Over the course of his life, Saul was beaten eight times for his faith, once he was pelted with rocks and left for dead, and he was thrown in prison. Tradition tells us that eventually Saul was beheaded in Rome by order of Caesar – all for his commitment to Christ.

However, his sufferings for the name of Jesus started very soon after his conversion. When he began to proclaim the good news of God's love there in Damascus, we are told the Jews conspired to kill him. However, Saul learned of their plot, and he and his friends devised a plan of their own. While the Jews kept a close eye on the gates of the city, Saul's friends lowered him in a basket from an opening in the wall, and he was able to escape under the guise of night and headed for Jerusalem.

You and I enjoy such great freedoms in this country, and freedom of religion is codified in our Bill of Rights. In some ways it is hard for us to imagine the kind of opposition we read here. However, as I learned in a fresh last fall way at Cape Town 2010 in South Africa, there are brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who have to deal with the same kind of persecution Saul did in Damascus.

On our flight to Cape Town, Lorie and I ran into a man who had been in my college ministry in Dallas many years ago. He was on his way to the Lausanne conference, too. I can't tell you his name for security reasons, so I'll call him Joe. Joe and his wife Donna, along with their four children, are undercover missionaries in China, and they have a powerful ministry of reaching nationals through teaching English and one-on-one discipleship.

On the flight, Joe shared with me that at the last minute the 240 members of the Chinese delegation were not allowed to come to the conference. They were met at the airport at Beijing by government officials who confiscated their passports, and refused to allow them to travel. Some of them were put under house arrest. Earlier I heard Joe say many Christians in China are routinely persecuted, and some have even been killed. Believers in China are suffering in ways we can only imagine.

Joe told me that in many Chinese churches, as a part of their discipleship, new converts to the faith are asked several questions before they are baptized, much as we do here in our church. However, in addition to being asked if they acknowledge Jesus as their Savior and Lord, new believers are also asked one final question, "Are you willing to die for Christ, if necessary?" This is the last question they are asked before they are baptized. It lets these new brothers and sisters know that they may have to pay a



price for their faith, and the leaders of the church in China want to make sure these new believers fully understand what they are getting into in becoming a follower of Christ.

The opposition you and I encounter here in the States is much more subtle, but it is present nonetheless. Our opposition ranges from being snubbed by someone to ridicule by journalists, or slurs by teachers in class, and in some instances even a lawsuit. I personally believe that apart from revival in this nation we will face increasing opposition to Christianity in this country in the years to come, despite the religious freedom our Constitution guarantees.

Author Jim Wallis says our dependence on God is always personal, but it should never be private. Eventually, our commitment to Christ needs to go public, and it may cost us. Are you ready to suffer for Christ, if necessary, like Saul did?

III. The Predicament of Saul.

The text tells us that when Saul left Damascus, he went to Jerusalem. However, when he arrived and tried to seek out other Christians, they were understandably afraid. “Isn’t this the man who took part in Stephen’s death? Isn’t he the one who left here with letters to arrest Christians in Damascus? His conversion isn’t real; he’s just trying to trap us.”

It took a person like Barnabas to overcome the suspicion. He reached out to Saul and befriended him, and it wasn’t until Barnabas extended the right hand of Christian fellowship that Saul found his way into the church in Jerusalem. We need more people like Barnabas who are willing to reach across barriers, overcome suspicions, and welcome the newcomer. We need more folks with a heart of compassion who will embrace the stranger.

As I reflected on this predicament of Saul earlier in the week, it reminded me of the early days after Chuck Colson’s conversion back in the 1970s. You will recall that back then he was a ruthless politician who was special counsel to President Nixon during the Watergate scandal. By his own admission, he was so committed to the president that he said he would even run over his own grandmother if it meant getting Nixon reelected. Colson spent time in prison for his part in Watergate, yet God reached out to him and transformed his heart. He started Prison Fellowship, an outreach to prisoners with which we partner for the Angel Tree project every Christmas, and his powerful books have been read by millions of people.

When Colson became a Christian, many people were suspicious. They said, “He’s just doing it to get a lighter sentence. It is not real. How can a person so ruthless become a follower of Christ?” However, his conversion was indeed genuine, and because of people like Doug Coe and one of my professors from seminary, Richard Lovelace – two men who reached out to him when no one else would, Chuck Colson became a powerful influence for Christ.

The transformation that took place in his life is nothing short of miraculous. Like Saul, he was knocked down, and he turned around 180 degrees. His priorities changed, his heart softened, and he became a new man. He wrote about his experience his book *Born Again*. If it can happen to Saul, if it can happen to Chuck Colson, it can happen to you!

Eventually, Saul’s enemies went after him in Jerusalem, too, and they planned to kill him as well. When the believers learned of the plot, they took Saul to Caesarea and sent him to his home town of Tarsus where he stayed for several years. Later he would launch an international outreach and become one of the first missionaries of the Church.

John Stott has written, “The story of Saul’s conversion in Acts 9 begins with him leaving Jerusalem with an official mandate from the high priest to arrest fugitive Christians, and [it] ends with him leaving Jerusalem as a fugitive Christian himself.”ⁱⁱⁱ How ironic. The persecutor became the persecuted.



Conclusion.

Dante Alighieri, the 14th century poet from Florence, was 35-years-old when he wrote *The Divine Comedy*. He penned the words during a very difficult time in his life. Dante had been on the losing side of a failed revolution, and as a result he was exiled from his beloved city of Florence. He knew that if he ever returned, he would surely be put to death. The result was a life suddenly flooded with enormous uncertainty, doubt, and fear. He was a man drowning in disappointment, and he discovered it was time for a mid-course correction.

You can see Dante's state of mind when you read the opening words of *The Divine Comedy*:

In the middle of the journey of [my] life
I came to my senses in a dark forest,
for I had lost the straight path.^{iv}

These words describe a personal awakening in which the poet's eyes were opened to things that he had either forgotten or never seen before. Dante's dark forest was not a literal but a figurative one. His forest existed deep in the interior of his soul.

Perhaps this morning you find yourself in a similar place. Like Dante, like Saul, like the astronauts on *Apollo 13*, you've discovered you've got a problem. You're on the wrong road, headed in the wrong direction, and you've lost your way. Forests can be things of our own making, and sometimes they are situations over which we have no control. But all of them can be used by God to help us come to our senses and find our way home.

Where are you today? What is God saying to you? How do you need to change, and what is God calling you to do? Don't put Him off, don't wander deeper into the forest. Come to your senses, and come to Jesus. A mid-course correction is just what you need. Amen.

ⁱ Gordon MacDonald, *Mid-Course Correction*, pp. 1,2.

ⁱⁱ James Boice, *Acts: An Expository Commentary*, p. 157.

ⁱⁱⁱ John R.W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts*, p. 179.

^{iv} Adapted from Gordon MacDonald, *Mid-Course Correction*, p. 7.

