

One of the books I am reading in these days is “1776” by David McCullough’s which covers the most important year of the revolutionary war between the thirteen colonies in North America and Great Britain. Even though the war did not officially end until the Treaty of Paris is signed in 1783, the book follows George Washington and his men through victories and losses, and also reveals the political inner workings and struggles with the war between the British Parliament and monarchy. In the 240 years since the American Revolution, the United States and Great Britain have moved from enmity to a firm alliance often spoken of as the “special relationship.” However, the road to that special relationship was not smooth. The hostility aroused in the United States by the American Revolution was inflamed by various disputes that arose between the two nations during the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815). The main issue was the forcible seizure of American seamen by the British Navy but disputes also arose about commerce, Indian policy, and boundaries. The spiraling anger culminated in what is known in the United States as the War of 1812, a conflict considered in Britain as a sideshow to the struggle against Napoleon. More or less a draw, the war was concluded in 1814 by the Treaty of Ghent. The treaty resolved none of the issues for which the US had fought, but it created a framework for future relations between the United States and Great Britain.

In the following decades, the two nations quarreled about the Canadian boundary but settled the disputes by negotiation. The American Civil War again brought Britain and the United States to the edge of hostilities because of attacks against Union commerce by Southern ships fitted out in British ports. After the war the British apologized to the United States for their part in the actions of the Confederate marauders and paid a large indemnity for losses suffered, a sign that the United States had emerged from the war as a powerful nation whose good will Britain now wished to secure. The last significant foreign-policy dispute between the United States and Britain occurred in 1895 over an American demand that Britain submit to international arbitration its dispute with Venezuela about the western boundary of British Guiana, near which gold had been discovered. Because neither the United States nor Britain wanted trouble, the dispute was resolved amicably. Ever since then these two former enemies have become staunch allies as relations between the two countries have grown so close that they habitually act in concert with each other in war and in diplomacy.

The truth is rivalries, contentions and conflicts can be so destructive, so caustic, so damaging that it’s not enough to simply ignore, sidestep, or try to contain them. This is true whether it be nations or societies or we as individuals. Fights, battles and wars have a devastating effect on our hearts, bodies, minds and souls. Of course, we all know this all started in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve rebelled against God and chose to do what God told them not to do. God told them if they did do it, they would die, as the Word of God tells us that *“the wages of sin is death”* (Romans 6:23). Well, we read that Adam and Eve did do it, and not long after their son Cain murdered his brother Abel because God had rebuked him for his attitude toward his brother. Rivalries, contentions and conflicts in our lives are an effect of our war against God’s authority over our lives. This is the essence of sin, which continues to cast its shadow of death over our lives, which will continue to be the battle within our hearts as long as we are here on earth. This is why, immediately after Adam and Eve were caught in their sin God not only declared the punishment for their sin, He also proclaimed the solution for their sin, so they might be restored back into the divine relationship with God they were created for. After He pronounced His curse on the evil one who tempted Adam and Eve with sin, God then said: *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel”* (Genesis 3:15). What this means is that someday the seed of the serpent (the spiritual descendants of the devil) would bruise the heel of the seed of the woman (the descendants of Adam and Eve).

The wages of sin is death, means the payment for sin is death. Jesus is the Son of God who was sent into the world by God to be the payment of death for our sin. Jesus was a descendant, the “seed” of Adam and Eve. On the cross he bore our judgment when Satan bruised his heel, causing his death. But bruising implies something that is not ultimate or final. Jesus died Calvary's cross and, in doing so, bruised His heel. Though wounded, the damage done to Jesus was not final and he rose from the dead three days later. Christ died on our behalf being made sin for us: “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Romans 6:23 tells us: “*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” The cross of Jesus Christ ends our rebellion against God’s authority in our lives. The rivalry, the contention, the conflict, the war that sin has caused in our hearts, minds and souls have been defeated the sacrificial crucifixion and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. Romans 5:10 tells us: “*For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.*” In Colossians 1:21-22 the apostle Paul writes: “*And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.*” Paul wrote these words because he had personally experienced the power of the gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ that transformed him from being adversary to ally of God. In our text for today we will read of how the apostle Paul came to faith in Jesus Christ. We have already been introduced to Saul; Luke first mentioned him at the end of Acts 7, using his original name, Saul, which was later changed to Paul in Acts 13. Saul’s conversion story is told three times in the book of Acts: in chapters 9, 22, and 26. The last two times Saul tells the story himself in his testimony while he is on trial. All three versions are dramatic. Saul doesn’t pull any punches about his terrible past: he speaks of his pride and violence and blindness, and of the transforming mercy, grace and love of God. Saul tells us how the gospel powerfully makes allies out of adversaries.

*But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Acts 9:1-2*

What we first see here is the character of who Saul (Paul) is. Luke describe Saul as someone who was “*breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.*” Saul is a dangerous guy. He is so zealous that his very breath is laced with threats and murder. He is violent and angry. He is a formidable enemy. This doesn’t describe a judicial interest in stopping people from misrepresenting God. Burning inside him is a longing for their destruction. He doesn’t just want to stop those who believe in Jesus. He wants to choke off the movement. He’d be like the present-day leader of ISIS to us: the worst possible enemy we could imagine. He’s been hunting down believers in Jerusalem. But now that isn’t enough. He wants to go to Damascus, 135 miles to the north and east. Saul’s plan is to go to the furthest point that the Gospel has reached, along a major transportation artery. If he can choke the Gospel there, maybe he can prevent it going anywhere else. This should give us some insight as to what groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram are thinking in their pursuit, in the name of God, to kill followers of Jesus and exterminate the Christian faith. We would do well to pray for them – yes, to stop what they are doing, but even more so to come to faith in Jesus Christ!

*Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Acts 9:3-9*

What does God do with violent, angry, and dangerous enemies? He dramatically overpowers them. In a flash of a moment Jesus sovereignly initiates a confrontation with Saul. So much for being seeker-sensitive. Regardless how we come to faith, it is always God who initiates. God seeks us when we are not looking for Him. Saul wasn't seeking to meet Jesus; he was seeking to exterminate followers of Jesus. But by his sovereign hand Jesus interrupts Saul's journey with the blinding light of the grace of God. Jesus identifies himself and asks Saul why he has been persecuting him, and Saul said, "*Who are you, Lord?*" Saul knew the Scriptures. He had read of God appearing to people like Moses and Abraham and David. But now it is happening to him. He knows that he is being confronted by the most glorious and holy Lord God himself. Jesus answers Saul question by saying, "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.*" Note that this adversary of Jesus does not protest Jesus demand. We no longer hear of "*breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.*" Saul is no longer violent and angry.

God destroys his enemies by shining the blinding light of His grace on their hearts. Saul leaves the encounter blind. For three days Saul was in the dark with no food or water. For what purpose? Saul is experiencing *the death of self*. With a single flash of light and a word from the voice that created the universe, Saul the violent, angry, persecutor of Christians was been destroyed. God had killed his enemy in Saul and now Saul was experiencing the tomb of Christ. He would be there for "*three days*" just like Jesus after his crucifixion. Saul reflected on this death experience in coming to faith in Jesus in Galatians 2:20: "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*" He also wrote of it in 2 Corinthians 4:11: "*For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh*" and in 2 Timothy 2:11: "*The saying is trustworthy, for: 'If we have died with him, we will also live with him.'*"

This should be the common experience of every born-again Christian. When the blinding light of God's grace enters our lives, it will reveal how blind we are to the reality of our desperate need for God. As descendants of Adam and Eve we are all naturally born enemies of God – and we praise God that when we put our faith in Jesus Christ we are saved from the dominion of sin. This is the great joy we have that Saul speaks of in Colossians 1:27: "*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*" But that is not a once in a lifetime experience, but rather it is to be a continuous experience throughout all of our lives. We see this in Romans, where in Romans 6:12, 14 Paul wrote: "*Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions . . . for sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace*" but then in Romans 7:18-20 he wrote: "*For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.*" When light of the gospel of Jesus enters our hearts we see our desperate need for God and we put our faith in Christ and we are saved from the "*reign*" and "*dominion*" of sin – and so then as followers of Jesus, as the light of the gospel of Christ is shining in our hearts, it will expose our desperate need for God because of the remaining sin that "*dwells*" within our hearts, and we will then again humbly put our faith Jesus.

Paul wrote of this in 2 Corinthians when after stating: "*we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another*" a few verses later states: "*For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. ' But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.'*" (2 Cor 3:18; 4:6-7). Saul's heart was changed when he encountered Jesus as the light of God, which revealed that he was blinded to the fact that everything he believed and stood for was wrong. The truth is the things that are wrong with us are so deep, the blindness is so complete, that we have no way out. Saul's conversion was dramatic, but we are all just the same. If God does not dramatically intervene, we have no hope.

*Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened.*

Acts 9:10-19a

Here we see how God uses the body of Christ to be the means by which the power of the gospel transforms adversaries into allies. What is significant here is that chooses one of the people who would have been a victim of Saul to take part in that transformation. If Jesus hadn't intervened, Saul would be seeking to murder Ananias. But instead, Ananias is told to go to Saul and heal him. And, just like you and I, Ananias did not want to go. But, just like you and I, God had to convince Ananias. And when God does convince Ananias, he did as he was told – just like we *sometimes* do. Ananias finds Saul and prays for him. Something falls from Saul's eyes and he can see. Saul stands up and gets baptized, and he eats and is strengthened. After three days in the dark without food or water, Saul rises from the dead, just like Jesus, whom he persecuted but now put his faith in.

The greatest enemy of the gospel is now begun his journey to being the greatest ally of the gospel. God defeats his enemies by transforming them and God invites the body of Christ to help Him.

*For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.*

*When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.*

*And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.*

*So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. Acts 9:19b-31*

The events that took place in the words we just read happened over a period of about three years, most of which Saul was alone in Arabia (Galatians 1:16-17). The northern edge of the Arabian empire was just opposite Damascus, not far away, but it was a desert wilderness. We know that Saul spent a good chunk of his time there re-studying the scriptures and in prayer - which reflected his call as an apostle, in that 1) he did meet Jesus on the road to Damascus, and 2) just as the other apostles had spent most of three years being taught by Jesus as they talked with Jesus, Saul spent most of three years in the desert being taught by Jesus in the Word and talking to Jesus in prayer.

These events, like the events we've looked at so far in the book of Acts, reveal not only happened but also what God was doing in people's hearts and lives - specifically, in the verses we just read, we see what God was doing in Saul's heart and life. The theme that seems to stand out most in what happened to Saul during those three years is *the power of weakness*. We see this beginning before he came to faith in Christ. Saul was a brilliant scholar of the Old Testament Scriptures and superb theologian, having been "*educated at the feet of Gamaliel*" (Acts 22:3) who was the greatest of the teachers of the Pharisees, perhaps of all time, because he was said to have known the law at a doctorate level. Yet Saul, even after spending a great deal of time re-studying the scriptures after his conversion - while his teaching may have been clearer and his insights may have greater and his arguments may have been sharper - the hearts of those to whom he spoke to were ever more hard and resistant than ever. So much so, that those who heard him sought to kill him. Whether it was in Damascus or Jerusalem, every time he preached the gospel, Saul had to run for his life.

It is believed that Saul learned the power of weakness during this time as he discovered that fleshly confidence in his training and his intellect were in fact a great weakness. Early in his faith in Christ had not learned dependence on God because he was in fact was arrogantly self-confident and pridefully convinced of his own gifts and strengths. Saul reflects on this lesson in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10: "*A thorn was given me in the flesh . . . to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*"

But, the question could be asked: What's wrong with pride and self-confidence in what we do for God? Well the truth is our best contributions to what we can do for God are completely inadequate. What we have been called to do is far too difficult for what any of us have to offer. We battle with the darkness that comes from hell when we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we share the gospel we are attempting to reach people who are in bondage so strong that nothing we can do will break them. And if we believe that we have the knowledge and the gifts and the skills to take on the and persuade people not to listen to the lies of the devil, we are fools. If we think our energy and our passion can shed light into dark places where people are hurting, we are even greater fools. What is required *is the presence of Jesus*. Light comes from *the face of Jesus*. Hope comes from *the words of Jesus*. Power comes from *the Spirit of Jesus*. It is critical for us to realize that whatever strength we bring to bear will get nothing done for the kingdom of God. We must yield ourselves to God in order to be made useful to him, so that through our lives and God will do only God can do. God is the only one who is a match for the devil. Jesus is the only light that can dispel the darkness.

The power of Jesus Christ is made perfect in our weakness. Saul won all the arguments in Damascus, but no one came to faith in Jesus because winning arguments doesn't change hearts and lives. Saul's strengths created anger and discord until he finally learned to give up and let the Lord use him in the way God wanted to use him. It is significant that while God saved Saul and called Saul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, it seems as if Saul was sure that with his extensive rabbinical training and experience would make him the ideal man to share the gospel with the Jews. Yet, he was driven out of Damascus and Jerusalem when he did so. But Acts 22:21 tells us that during the time Saul spent in Jerusalem, Jesus appeared to him and told him he was not to focus his ministry on Jews, "*for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.*" When we are weak, we are strong in God. We see this even in that while Saul was learning the power of weakness in his struggles to continue to learn to die in his pride and self-confidence: "*The church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.*" The power of the gospel transforms adversaries to allies when there is "*peace*" in the body of Christ. God's power is made perfect when we are weak in ourselves.

*I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.* 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Paul's words here reflect a man who has been dramatically transformed by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Saul was known as the greatest persecutor of the first church, and after the blinding light of the gospel of Jesus Christ revealed that he was even more than that, Paul confessed himself to be the "foremost" of all "sinners" – which Paul saw as a display of God's "perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life." Saul personally experienced the power of the gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ that dramatically transformed him from being adversary to ally of God. What we have in common with Saul is that every person that comes to a saving faith in Jesus Christ is a dramatic transformation from being an adversary to ally of God – because we are all natural born enemies of God and we all continue to experience the battle in our hearts with the remaining sin that still dwells within us. Like Saul, the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ that transforms us from being an adversary to ally of God is a transformation that changes the core of our being – where the foundation of who we were before Christ is destroyed and a new foundation is built up by the Holy Spirit. We are now the residence of the Holy Spirit. We are now the children of God forever. Everywhere we go and everything we think, say and do should flow out of that foundation. The challenge we face is to not let ourselves believe anything less than that.

However much we might feel as if we are still who we once were, by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are not. Rivalries, contentions and conflicts in our lives are an effect of our war against God's authority over our lives. Fights, battles and wars have a devastating effect on our hearts, bodies, minds and souls. The cross of Jesus Christ ends our rebellion against God's authority. God's grace is sufficient. The power of the gospel of Jesus Christ is made perfect in our weakness. May today be the beginning of a movement of the Spirit in us that would powerfully transform the foundations of our lives from enemies to allies, - so that Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience in us as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." Amen!

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