

Series: The Unfinished Business of Easter

#6: Transformed by the Empty Tomb

Acts 6:8-10; 7:51 – 8:1 (TEV) and Acts 9:1-6 (NKJV – read by pastor)

By John Gill

This morning we are continuing our series of sermons entitled, “The Unfinished Business of Easter.” Throughout these six weeks, we have been looking at how the truth of the empty tomb of Easter brought transformation to the lives of the people to whom the risen Christ appeared. Today, we consider one who apparently never encountered Jesus in the flesh, but whose life was dramatically transformed, none-the-less.

After the amazing news of the Resurrection and the tragic suicide of Judas, scripture tells us that the first thing the remaining eleven disciples did was to choose a replacement for Judas. Even though the Risen Christ has told them to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, they took matters into their own hands – and cast lots for a new disciple – and Matthias won the lottery.

Instead of waiting, the Disciples “ran ahead of the Holy Spirit – and it turned out that the results were undistinguished. Now, I’m not disparaging Matthias – I’m sure he was an honorable man, a man of faith. But the fact is, that this is the first and the last time we hear of Mathias. He may have won the raffle, but it seems he wasn’t God’s choice for the twelfth Apostle. Instead, God had his eye on a very different candidate – an unlikely choice – but the ideal person to carry the Gospel of Christ to the world. He would choose a Jewish Pharisee named “Saul,” who we now know by the name of “Paul.”

If you have your Bible near you, grab it. I’d like for you to turn to the ninth chapter of Acts and read along in your translation. The text to look up is Acts, chapter 9, beginning with verse 1. I’ll be reading the passage from the NKJV. You may notice that your translation reads a little differently from mine.

So we pick up the story of the conversion of Paul with Acts, chapter 9, verse 1:

“Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And he said, “Who are You, Lord?”

Then the Lord said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” So he, trembling and astonished, said, “Lord, what do you want me to do?”

Did you catch what was different? The last two verses, right? Look at verses 5.

In many versions, it says, "'Who are you, Lord?' he asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you persecute,' the voice said."

But, in the translation I read, it says "And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' Then the Lord said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'"

The texts are quite different. Why? What's going on here? And why is it important?

Well, for the vast majority of scripture passages in our Bibles, there is great uniformity in the translations, apart from bringing antiquated vocabulary and phrases into the vernacular of our day. But occasionally you come across a verse that one translation renders quite differently from another. Why?

The reason for the variations lies in the fact that we do not have the original documents of any writings that are in our Bible, only early manuscript copies on which to base our translations. And, in a few instances, the ancient manuscripts themselves do not agree on certain verses. So, when that happens, Bible translators have to make a decision about which ancient manuscript should be considered more authoritative.

Some translations, including the NKJV (and the KJV before it), reflect an early manuscript that includes the "goads" comment, while most, more modern translations have chosen to base their versions on other ancient manuscripts that do not include the "goads" comment.

Which is more authoritative? Which is the correct translation of verse 5? Well, scholars use many methods to try to determine authenticity. For instance, in this case, there are two possibilities about how this variation occurred: One option is that, for some reason, someone along the way added this phrase - that it wasn't originally part of the account. The other possibility is that the phrase is original, and that it was dropped for some reason, or even by accident as an oversight as the scrolls were being copied. Which is it?

I believe that it makes more sense that the phrase was omitted, rather than added later. That's because it is such an odd statement that it's hard to imagine that someone would concoct it and insert it into the story. It seems much more likely that it was accidentally omitted, or perhaps was thought to be so awkward that it was deleted by some well-meaning scribe along the way.

By now, you're probably thinking, "Well, preacher, that all very interesting. But, 'So what?' Why is it important, anyway?" Because – it makes a huge difference in how you interpret this story.

The traditional view of Paul's conversion goes like this: Paul (then known as Saul) was a prominent young Jewish Pharisee who was zealous to defend Jewish orthodoxy. Saul was so adamant in his beliefs that he viewed cracking down on all forms of Jewish heresy as a noble calling. So, he took the lead in defending the Jewish faith against the "Followers of the Way," those misguided Jews who had come to believe in Jesus as their Messiah.

Saul is presented as an accomplice in the murder of all those who refuse to recant their faith in Christ, even giving his blessing as a mob stones Stephen to death. The impression we have is that Saul has no qualms or reservations about persecuting Christians; that as he travels on the road to Damascus, he is breathing fire and hatred right up to the moment the blinding light hit him. Based on most of our newer translations, that is what we are led to believe.

Other translation, like the KJV, tell the story in much the same way, but give it something of a different slant. In those translations, the Lord not only asks why Saul is persecuting him, but goes on to say, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

Now what on earth does that mean? What is a "goad" anyway?

"Goad" is from a Greek word, meaning, "to prick, sting, or pierce." It usually refers to a stick with a pointed end that is used to prod animals.

What was "pricking, stinging, or piercing" Saul? - misgivings? - doubts? - pricking of the conscience? For some time leading up to this cataclysmic event, Saul had been "kicking against" the promptings of the Spirit that had been invading his mind and heart. He was resisting the authority of God in his life.

The phrase, "to kick against the goads" was actually a common phrase in Paul's day, which meant "to resist authority." The Amplified Bible makes the meaning clear. This is how that bible translates this verse: "It is dangerous and it turns out badly for you to keep kicking against the goad – that is, to offer vain and perilous resistance."

You see, the KJV implies a very different scenario to the story: Yes, Saul was zealous in defense of the Jewish faith; Yes, at first he saw it as his duty to oppose the "Followers of the Way;" And, yes, he gave tacit approval to the stoning of Stephen.

But as he witnessed the courage and dignity with which Stephen died, heard him ask God to forgive his murderers and saw the angelic peace on his face, I believe Saul's soul was pricked. Then, as he continued his oppression of the believers, Saul couldn't get the image of Stephen's face out of his mind. Inwardly, he began to doubt himself and the beliefs he clung to so obsessively.

So, as a defense mechanism to hide his growing insecurity, Saul became even more aggressive and arrogant (psychologists tell us that is a common reaction to insecurity). He was "kicking against the goad" of the Holy Spirit. Just like the Old Testament character, Jacob in the book of

Genesis – you remember how he wrestled with an angel – or with God, as some translations put it. Saul was wrestling against God, and with himself. It was only a matter of time until he would have to come to terms with God’s will for his life.

Saul set-out for Damascus to track-down Christians unaware that, actually, the Risen Christ was tracking down him! Christ was waiting for just the right moment to make his move!

As Saul made the journey to Damascus, his only companions were temple soldiers. Now, as a strict Pharisee, Saul would not have associated with soldiers; so for all intents and purposes, Saul was alone with no one to talk to – plenty of time to think. Picture Saul traveling for days in silence, no longer able to hide from his growing doubts, haunted by Stephen’s radiant face. By the time they neared Damascus, Saul’s spirit was in turmoil - he was experiencing an emotional crisis. Finally, the moment was right, and the Resurrected Christ confronts Saul in a blinding light.

That’s how the New King James Version seems to tell the story.

Do you see the difference? We usually think of Saul’s conversion as being sudden, with no warning. BANG! But not according to the KJV! A sudden conversion? NO. A sudden surrender? YES. You see, Jesus didn’t speak to Saul “out of the blue.” He had been dealing with Saul all along!

So, which translation do you like better? In this case, I prefer the KJV! Why? Because many of us (including me) have trouble identifying with conversions that happen like a bolt of lightning. That doesn’t ring true to our experience.

But we all can identify with the experience of wrestling with God. Who among us has never resisted the prompting of the Spirit of God due to our stubbornness, arrogance, or pride? You and I are no strangers to the inner-turmoil of the soul, and moments of emotional crisis. And many of us have also experienced the “breaking of our spirit” (like wild horses that must be broken before they can be useful to their master). After a great inner-struggle, like Paul, we finally surrender, and open our hearts to hear God speak to us.

Personally – I have to confess that growing up, I always had trouble identifying with Paul’s conversion. But with this way of understanding this text, now I can. In fact, now that I think about it, in some ways, Paul’s experience was very similar to mine! I, too, resisted God’s will for my life. And, just like Paul, I went through a season of emotional turmoil before I surrendered.

Most of you know that my father was a United Methodist pastor. As a youth, my dad always encouraged me to keep open the possibility that God might call me to follow in his footsteps, although he never pressured me. In fact, he told me he would be proud whatever vocation I chose. Only, not to rule out being a pastor, just because he was one.

Looking back, I believe that God was calling me, even then. But I resisted that call. I deliberately went my own way. I went off to college and got a degree in music, intending to teach in the public schools. But that didn't seem quite right. So, I edged my way closer to God's will, and got a Master's Degree in Church Music and Christian Education, planning to serve on staff in a larger church. But even that wasn't enough for God. I felt unsettled, tormented in my spirit.

Now I know what I was doing . . . I was "kicking against the goads!" And let me tell you this – Jesus' words from the blinding light are so true! "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" . . . "It is dangerous and it turns out badly for you. . . to offer vain and perilous resistance." I discovered that you can't win a wrestling-match with God!

Finally, my rebellious spirit was broken, and I surrendered to God's will for my life. Then I was finally able to ask, along with Saul, "Lord, what do you want me to do?"

It's just as the refrain of that old Gospel hymn says it:

I'll go where You want me to go, dear Lord,
O'er mountain, or plain, or sea;
I'll say what You want me to say, dear Lord,
I'll be - what You want me to be.

My friends, has the empty tomb of Easter caused you to question what you had thought you believed to be true? Have you been wrestling with God? Are you "kicking against the goads" this morning?

Let me tell you – you can only do it for so long. Sooner or later, God will get your attention.

Maybe he's doing that right now! Perhaps this is your Damascus Road moment?

- What prompting of the Spirit have you been resisting? What decisions and commitments have you be putting off?
- Is there a calling God is placing on your life that you have shut your ears to?
- Are you tired of "kicking against the goading" of the Holy Spirit?

Like Saul, you can try to ignore the promptings of God in your life. You can resist God's will, due to stubbornness and pride. You can even turn away and do exactly the opposite of what God expects.

But you can't do it forever. God will not leave you at peace till you stop "kicking against the goads," and start asking, "Lord, what do you want me to do? - and then, do it.

Let us pray:

God our Father,
you brought the Gospel to all the world
through the preaching of Paul, Your apostle.
May we who celebrate his conversion to the faith
follow him
in bearing witness to the truth.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son,
who lives and reigns with You
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.