

A Thorny Twist of Fate

Galatians 1:11-24

Text:

*He who once persecuted us is now preaching
the faith he once tried to destroy.*

Galatians 1:23

Introduction

The heading of this passage of scripture reads—in our pew Bibles—*Paul’s Vindication of His Apostleship*. Here he is defending his title as an Apostle of Jesus Christ simply because the leaders in the Jerusalem Church refused to acknowledge Paul as an apostle. In the early Church in Judea, an apostle was defined as one who had experienced the earthly, physical presence of Jesus of Nazareth, and then proclaimed faith in him as Lord and Savior. That person had seen Jesus bless the little children; or had witnessed Jesus’ healing the blind, the deaf, the lame and the leper; or had sat as Jesus taught the multitudes in his Sermon on the Mount; or had watched him carry his cross along the Via Dolorosa to Calvary. Paul had witnessed none of this. Therefore, according to the apostles in the Jerusalem Church, Paul’s claim to be an apostle was spurious and fraudulent.

Paul admits to being the least worthy of the apostles since he had persecuted followers of Jesus of Nazareth, but because God had revealed his Son to him on the road to Damascus—that is, because the Risen Christ had appeared to him—Paul calls himself an apostle. As Saul of Tarsus, Paul had been encountered by the Living, resurrected Christ; and that encounter justified his apostleship.

On the Wrong Road

As we consider our text, it is apparent that there is another thorn in the side of the Jerusalem apostles, who, astounded, vehemently observe: *He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he had once tried to destroy*. They are obviously still smarting from Paul’s past treachery, when he was known throughout the Christian communities as Saul of Tarsus, a miserable miscreant, a misbegotten misanthrope, who passionately hated all of Christian humanity.

This impassioned Pharisee—religious Jew and Roman citizen steeped in Jewish law—rushed head-long with an unparalleled zeal to identify followers of Jesus the Nazarene, bind them, throw them into prison, and arrange for their deaths. This passionate Tarsan was one and the same as he who witnessed and consented to the stoning death of Stephen, early deacon and first martyr of the church: *and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul*.ⁱ With official documents from the synagogues in his hand, Saul pounded that road to Damascus with fiery anticipation . . . until a bright light blinded him, he fell to the ground, and the voice of Jesus confronted him:

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

Who are you, Lord? rejoined the blind inquisitor.

*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*ⁱⁱ

Saul of Tarsus had been traveling the wrong road! In the flash of a lightning strike, Saul experienced a thorny twist of fate. *God used all the wrong roads to bring him to all the right places,*ⁱⁱⁱ and subsequently for Saul—renamed Paul—one road led to home where previously a thousand roads had led to the wilderness.^{iv}

Joseph Conrad, twentieth century British novelist, author of *Heart of Darkness*, observed perceptively and profoundly:

Most of us, if you will pardon me for betraying the universal secret, have, at some time or other, discovered in ourselves the readiness to stray far, ever so far, on the wrong road.

Anyone with an ounce of integrity would admit that wrong roads have played a prominent part in his/her history and are likely to play a significant role in his/her future.

We're speaking here **not** of the road not taken where two roads diverge in a wood, but rather of the road we fatefully choose and then—upon a doleful discovery—regretfully acknowledge as the wrong road, one which seemed enticing enough, even romantic, with an adventurous lure or carefully calculated with limited information or inadequate experience. It might have been indeed a calculated choice that later for some reason—for any reason, for a twist of good fortune gone bad, or an unexpected turn of circumstances—changed direction and turned sour. For whatever reason, that road was a wrong road, a mistake, a miscalculation that required a turning back or forging a new direction. As some of us come to an advanced stage in our lives, how easily we lament with the Pennsylvania Dutch insight: *old too soon and smart too late.*

To All the Right Places

Here's the Good News of Christ's Gospel, however, as manifested in Paul's thorny twist of fate: *God uses all the wrong roads to bring us to all the right places.*

For whatever reason we chose the wrong roads in the first place—whomever we have hurt along the way, whoever has made the personal sacrifices to help us survive, whatever we have learned in the course of our blunders— God uses all the wrong roads to bring us to all the right places.

The path of marriage that all too soon turned into the road to divorce . . .

The path of comfortable faith bitterly turned into the road of nagging doubt . . .

The path of expectant hope sourly turned into the road of dogging despair . . .

The path of virile wellness that helplessly turned into a road of dependent illness

The path of invincible youth that fleetingly turned into a road of inevitable aging

The path of self-fulfilling careers that turned into a road of unwanted joblessness

The path of prosperous peace aggressively turned into the road to devastating war

God uses all of these wrong roads to bring us to all the right places.

Even when we have traveled down roads of religious rancor, uncontrollable anger, cunning deception, self-destructive unfaithfulness, mind-boggling confusion, and intensifying hopelessness . . . God uses all of these wrong roads to bring us to all the right places.

Conclusion

Yesterday the Elders of your Session met for three hours to plan for the coming year, and I can attest that your Session is organized, poised, and well-positioned at the starting line. With your new Pastor, they are ready to lead this church into a vibrant future.

Were I to possess the demeanor of a prophet standing erect with no doubt, ^v I would declare to you this word from God:

Be ready! Be ready! No matter what road you have been on, God is going to use you—each and every one of you—to build up his church, the Body of Christ in this place. *For God uses all the wrong roads to bring us to all the right places.* And that, my friends, may well be for you an uncanny twist of fate.

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June 6, 2010

Notes

ⁱ Acts 7:58

ⁱⁱ Acts 9:3-5

ⁱⁱⁱ C.S. Lewis, quoted in *The Word*, Vol. 4, No. 2

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v See Dylan Thomas' *A Visit to Grandpa's*, last sentence: *But grandpa stood firmly on the bridge, and clutched his bag to his side, and stared at the flowing river and the sky, like a prophet who has no doubt.*