

Asking Jesus, Pt. 8
Who Are You, Lord?
Acts 9: 1-9

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**April 24, AD 2022
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

What a glorious Easter celebration we had! It was the culmination of our 42 days of looking deeply at the questions and requests people made of Jesus. Today, we remember that people still made requests of Jesus *after* his resurrection. And he still acts with loving power in our lives. This morning's question remains urgent through the centuries, "Who are you, Lord?" So let's follow our same structure as we probe the depths of this conversion story.



Who's Asking? We know him as Paul, the great missionary and writer of so many New Testament letters. But for years, he was Saul, the highly educated, blue-blooded Pharisee who lived to protect the traditions of Israel. He despised the Christians. For they blasphemously worshipped the man Jesus, as if he were the LORD I AM himself come among us. So to Saul

this Jesus business seemed like a dangerous novelty. He wanted to shut them all down. But the deluded followers of Jesus were disgustingly tenacious. They continued to glorify this man even though he had been condemned and crucified. They even held to the scandalous fantasy that Jesus had risen from the dead. To Saul, the Christians were enemy #1, rank liberal heretics who needed to be exterminated. As someone quipped, "Saul was voted in high school as *Least Likely to Become a Christian!*"

Our passage tells us that Saul "was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women, and committed them to prison" (Acts 8: 3). He was full of fury at Christians, "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." One day he was on the road to Damascus, Syria, bearing letters that gave him authority to arrest any Jewish followers of Christ he found there. About midday, a light suddenly shone that was brighter than the Middle Eastern sun. As this vivid painting by Caravaggio depicts, the noontime sun was like midnight in comparison to the heavenly light. The spotlight is on Saul. All else appears dark. So the mighty Saul fell to the ground in terror. Though blinded by

the light, Saul could yet hear the voice that spoke, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” The fierce, ever-certain monotheist Saul asked feebly, “*Who are you, Lord?*”



The Question Within the Question. All Saul’s certainty evaporated under the reality of the light that pierced his eyes and heart. The voice that spoke to him undercut the authority he thought his tradition gave him. Saul thought he had God and the world figured out. He thought he was in control. He thought he was doing

the right thing, the God-pleasing thing as violence burned through his every action. In an instant, Saul knew he was dead wrong. Now nothing made sense. Someone was claiming him. Rearranging everything. Pride melted into trembling humility, “*Who are you, Lord?* In light of this blinding light I have no idea who runs the universe. I have no idea of my place.”

An abyss opened up in Saul. This is an existential cry from the soul. It makes me think of Edvard Munch’s famous 1895 painting called *The Scream*. If this is the way it is, I am undone. I can’t take the world the way it is. I can’t process the new reality. Before this glory, I am horrified at my own being. Who are you and how will you deal with me? What will you do with one such as I?



Jesus’ Reply. Jesus pulled no punches with Saul. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” This simple statement completely upheaved Saul’s life. There’s so much in this sentence! Let’s look at three aspects. First, we note that Jesus *accepted that Saul called him “Lord.”* Every day since he could talk, Saul had recited, “The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6: 4). Only the one LORD I AM was the true God. Such was the basis of Saul’s passionate monotheism. But Jesus’ reply indicates that the one God is both Father and Son. Jesus’ answer in this moment underlies the brilliant affirmation Paul would make years

later, “For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through him we exist” (I Cor. 8:6). In time, of course, Paul would realize that the Holy Spirit is

also fully God. But on the Damascus Road, the Lordship of Jesus converted him. God was more, way more, than he had ever realized. Everything was being reworked.

Second, Jesus' answer revealed the organic, *spiritual unity of Christ's disciples with their Lord*. We are one body with our Head. In persecuting Christians, Saul was persecuting Jesus himself. Jesus corroborated what he said in his parable of the sheep and the goats, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (Mt. 25: 40). The conviction must have seared Saul more than the blinding light. Every arrest, every imprisonment, every death was on Saul's head as having been done to Jesus himself, the guy who turns out to be the Lord of all. Saul who had devoted his life to serving God was totally pinned as having done just the opposite. How we relate to each other is how we are relating to Christ! And he was in lot of trouble.

Third, Jesus *implied forgiveness by giving a mission*. Rise! Enter the city. You will be told what to do. In another recounting of this moment, Paul recalled that Jesus' answer included sending him to the Gentiles, whom he would have despised, "to open their eyes...that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified" (Acts 26: 18).



Our Reply. While few conversions are as dramatic as Saul's, the dynamics of such transformation run through many lives which come to Christ. We're cruising along in our certainties about life, pretty content with how things are. Then comes a new awareness. An insight. The dawning of a realization that maybe we've had it all wrong. Maybe life isn't about me, or about me becoming my better me, becoming whatever me I choose as master of

my life. Maybe I don't know how to solve the mystery of my life at all. And maybe it turns out I'm on the wrong path, a path to misery and destruction. But even in that sickening horror, other news comes. Someone is looking for me. Someone knocks on the door. Behind that door of my heart I am hiding for fear that I'm going to be blamed, shamed and discarded. But from the other side of the door I hear a voice call me by name. It's Jesus. He comes to rearrange everything. But not to my destruction. He comes to give me life. In a risk of faith, I open the door and he enters in. Nothing is ever the same.

These encounters occurs across all ages, stages and cultures. Darren Carlson writes,

A friend of mine tells of a Persian migrant who arrived at a refugee center at 6 a.m., visibly upset. He told his story to a Persian pastor: During the night he saw someone dressed in white raise his hand and say, “Stand up and follow me.” The Persian man said, “Who are you?” The man in white replied, “I am the Alpha and the Omega. I’m the way to heaven. No one can go to the Father, except through me.” He began to ask the Persian pastor: “Who is he? What am I going to do? Why did he ask me to follow him? How shall I go? Tell me.”

In response, the pastor held out his Bible and asked, “Have you seen this before?” “No,” he replied. “Do you know what it is? ”No.”

The pastor then opened to the Book of Revelation: “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.” The man started crying and said, “How can I accept him? How can I follow him?” So the pastor led him in prayer and peace came over him.¹

Now the truth in such encounters is that the invisible player is God the Holy Spirit. Every conversion requires the work of the Holy Spirit in our souls. We come awake to who Jesus is and yield our hearts. This is not our doing, though it requires a response from us. This, too, is God’s gift. In such moments, old certainties fall away even as the conviction of the truth of Christ takes deep root in us. From Saul to Augustine to C.S. Lewis to the person in the pew, the Spirit creates the moment when we ask the first question of new life, “*Who are you, Lord?*”



Closing with Christ. This is the point for us. Salvation is the work of God in our lives. I can’t make you repent and believe. You can’t make yourself repent and believe. This is God’s work. If you want it, that’s God prompting you to want it. But that doesn’t mean you’re out of the equation. You want God to show himself to you? Ask him. Are you tired of kicking against God’s reality and

getting smacked and bloodied? Turn to the Lord Jesus. Embrace him as he embraces you.

This is what the great theologian John Owen called “closing with Christ.” It’s sealing the deal. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He lived the perfect life of relationship with his Father. He went to the cross to take our place, to take our sins on himself. He rose from the dead shattering the power of death. He did it; you and I did nothing. He wiped out your sins past, present and future by his own will and work—you and I had nothing to do with that. He opened heaven to us by his own effort, not ours. He sends his Spirit to shine light in our hearts so that we can see who Jesus is and trust him. *But we must close with Christ.* We are summoned to repent and believe the gospel.

For Saul, this was falling on his face and never again returning to his life of persecuting Christians. It was putting his faith solely in Jesus as Lord and Savior. For us, this means leaving off what Tim Keller calls “our self-salvation systems.” Any way that we have lived which leaves us in charge must be abandoned. Any way that justifies our existence by what we have achieved, accomplished, inherited, or earned must be considered, as Paul would later say, just a dung heap. And of course any actions that contradict God’s Word must be yielded. I repent of my will, my way, my life and I *faith* into Christ. I rely on him alone for my salvation, my meaning, my purpose.

Listen. It is necessary to close with Christ. Some here have never done that. You may have been in the church all your life, or you may have wandered in here just today. It makes no difference. Have you closed with Christ? Is the heart of your life the fact that you have looked away from yourself and looked wholly to Jesus to save you, to justify you, to give you life and direction? Have you realized that life is not about being liberated into my self. But being liberated *from* myself into Christ? If God is calling you to put your trust in Jesus, do it! And come see an elder or pastor so that you know it’s not a fiction of your mind, but a reality you affirm. I no longer trust in myself; I trust in Jesus. I will no longer live for myself, but for him alone. I have been blind, but now I see. I see the Lord Jesus is the one it’s all about. If you have any doubt about the closing, please speak to me.

Prayer

What encouragement we gain from Saul!
If you can forgive him, you can forgive me.
If you can rework his life, you can rework mine.
If you can redeem his wasted years
And create an eternally important purpose
Then you can make something of my life.

Shine your light again, Lord Jesus!
For I have often closed my eyes
To you and your little ones.
Speak to me afresh,
For I have been deaf to your Word.
Let me see you for who you are.
Let me hear clearly what you want me to do.
Knock me down if you have to, but please
Quicken my heart. Renew my faith.
Turn my lost years into fruitful mission
Everywhere I go, that you might be magnified.

¹ (www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/muslims-dream-jesus/)