

What if you met Jesus today? You were going about your business, and then bam you just bump into Jesus – how would that go? What would Jesus say to you? Would Jesus say, “I can see you are going through a hard time right now and I want to let you know I am here for you.” Or would Jesus say, “I am proud of the work you are doing and how much love you are pouring into your family.” Or would Jesus say, “I am really heartbroken to see that you are really making some bad decisions, you are causing a lot of hurt and pain.” Or would Jesus say, “You care about the wrong things, your life is being wasted.” What would Jesus say to you? Right now? This is a good question to consider from time to time – a little spiritual gut check. Are we on the right track, are we pursuing God’s path, are we doing good in the world?”

David Miller is a Princeton ethics professor. He also is an advisor to Citibank executives – helping them tackle issues of banking and morality. Before Miller went to seminary, he spent many years in the banking industry. Where he used to walk the trading floor, now he works with the bank executives to think through strategy and morality around ideas and issues. One of the things he asks people to do is consider the four M’s – what would your mother, your mentor, the media, and your maker think of this idea, the situation, the behavior? How would you be judged by those stakeholders? That is another kind of gut check. Ultimately, we do answer to our maker for how we live our lives.

This is what happened to Paul. The early Christians were being persecuted for professing faith in Christ. Paul was one of the leaders of that movement. Acts 8 says, “Saul (which was the name he was called before he became a Christian) was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.” Paul admits that he was throwing people in prison, torturing them, and sentencing them to death. That is what he was up to on the day he met Jesus.

This is how Paul tells the story, *“While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Then he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you were persecuting. Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me. I asked, ‘What am I to do, Lord?’ The Lord said to me, ‘Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do. Since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, those who were with me took my hand and led me to Damascus.*

And the rest, as they say, is history. Paul the persecutor, was called on the carpet by Jesus of Nazareth. Paul was ruining his life and the lives of others. Paul was living in sin and in darkness. Then Jesus entered his life and to radically change the course of his future.

This summer I had the privilege of spending some study leave time in Greece, imaging the Apostle Paul on his journeys. Paul’s travels were extensive, and we only scratched the surface, but we visited four significant sites of Paul’s ministry. Thessaloniki, Philippi, Corinth, and Athens. Over

the next few weeks, I am going to walk you through the biblical events that took place in these sights and try to enliven them for you. I promise this is not going to be like watching your neighbor's slide show of their summer vacation photos.

In studying Paul, through his writings, the writings of Paul scholars, and visiting these ancient sites, I rediscovered a formidable character. A man of passion, vigor, dogged determination, and what must have been an attractive or at least unique and compelling personality. Otherwise, there is no way that Paul could have arrived in a town, where there was not one single Christian, and preach, then baptize, then organize, then educate, and then commission local churches to carry on when he moved on to the next place.

Paul was clearly a talented and passionate man – previously he used those talents to keep order and to suppress the new religion in which people worshipping Jesus. But after his encounter – Paul was all gusto to evangelize on behalf of Jesus. I love this conversion story because it is classic bad guy turned good. But super talented bad guy turned good. Maybe that is why God called him – God chose to use him because of that raw talent and sheer energy. It is interesting to think about all the villains throughout history and how much good they could have accomplished if only they had been given a course correction. Paul's story is more than the story of the banker turned ethicist; it is murderer turned preacher.

Now what we know is that it is hard to change directions when you are really committed to a path. You are on a path to make a lot of money; it is hard to give that up and pursue a new calling. You are on a path to political prominence; it is hard to give that up because your family really needs to more of your time. Even when we are on obviously bad paths, it is hard to give them up – paths to destroy our relationships, paths to destroy our health, paths to destroy our futures – we are stubborn creatures and so when we pick a course it is hard to pivot to a new one. I don't know if you remember the older man in Grumpy Old Men, he's the father of one of the old men. Well, he's probably in his 90's and someone is lecturing him about improving his health and he retorts, "Bacon for breakfast, bacon for lunch, and I drink my dinner." That's what it is like to be committed to a path – it is hard for us to change things up very much.

An object in motion stays in motion...until acted upon by an outside force. In Paul's case, the outside force was Jesus. Jesus is the course corrector, who can and does ask us for an accounting. Saul, why are you persecuting people? Jacob, why are you destroying your marriage? Mary, why are you wasting your talents? Timothy, why are you turning away from your faith? Jesus calls us out and asks us to put down our nets and pick up lives of meaning and value and service.

The conversion of Paul is radical and interesting in that it shows us what it could be like to really be open to Jesus' impact on our lives. Paul's encounter with Jesus had me wondering, what would that experience be like – to see Jesus, face to face? Would it be humbling, terrifying, awe inspiring, life changing? Or all the above. Would Jesus be proud of the work I was doing and the ways my life had unfolded, or would Jesus want more and be disappointed? Would Jesus say, your church isn't very big – it should be ten times as big, and your people aren't very joyful or sacrificial, what kind of leader are you? Maybe Jesus would be mad that in my twelve years of ministry at GPC only one person from the church has gone to seminary. Why aren't you inspiring future church preachers? Maybe Jesus would say, your prayer life is lacking, you read the Bible with a closed

mind, and you serve people in need only when it fits into your schedule. Is that how my encounter would go? I worry that it might. I worry that facing Jesus would actually be blinding for me by his sheer purity and light.

I know Jesus doesn't desire for us to be ashamed or afraid but also, we know Jesus saw great potential in people. In ordinary people, he saw something special – he saw how they could be put to work for the sake of the kingdom. Jesus a return on the talents bestowed in people. That was a sobering lesson Paul had to learn. Paul isn't a figure for us to worship, as he would say very clearly, but Paul points us to the life changing experience of being confronted by Jesus. Paul never met Jesus, but he was about the same age as Jesus. Paul did meet and spend time with some of the disciples. Paul became a student, learning all he could about the person of Jesus. He was given the opportunity to absorb all these lessons and to form a solid picture of what Jesus was like and cared about and called us to do. And with his encounter with Jesus and with his collected stories, Paul was ready to go. Besides being the most effective preacher and church organizer to date, Paul also could write. And that was not the norm at the time and so we have been given his letters, his stories, his concerns, his hopes, his theology. The New Testament, besides the Gospel, is mostly Paul or attributed to Paul.

I think because of Paul's experience of living the wrong way and then having seen the light, he was bold to tell his story. He liked to say he was the worst sinner of all. He would tell it to everyone who would listen - Paul wanted people to find a new lives. Paul wanted the church to grow. Paul wanted Christians to thrive. He wanted the way of Jesus to become *the* way because he knew just how powerful it could be.

In some ways, Paul's encounter with Jesus becomes our encounter. Seeing Jesus face to face and being asked the sobering question – how are you living your life? Why are you doing the things you do?

I think Paul is going to be good for us. Paul will give it to us straight. He will light a fire under us. He will preach with great conviction that we all need more Jesus!

More light. More Jesus. Thanks be to God! Amen.