

Recovering from a Bad Start

Psalm 148; Acts 9:1-9

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I have a friend who lives in Virginia now. I don't know if she still does this, but she used to keep Exodus 2:12 posted on her refrigerator door. It's about Moses, and this is what it says: "He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand."

That'll get your day off to a good start! Right up there with the Twenty-third Psalm! For my friend, it did. This verse was a reminder to her that Moses, the great prophet of Israel, was also a murderer. Remember, the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt when this occurred. They were also slaves in Egypt when Moses was born, and his mother feared for his life. You probably recall the story of how she made a basket of bulrushes, made the basket watertight, placed her infant son in it, and then put the basket into the river's edge among the reeds. The Egyptian Pharaoh's daughter then came to the river to bathe, found the basket and baby and took him to be her own child. So Moses, a Jewish child, grew up in a royal Egyptian home.

When he was a young man, Moses observed the harsh slavery of his people under the heavy hand of the Egyptians. One day he saw an Egyptian soldier beating a Jew, one of his kinsmen. That was when he looked this way and that and then murdered the Egyptian soldier and hid his body in the sand.

Not only did his mother put him in a basket in the river. And not only did he grow up in the home of the oppressive enemy of his people. But Moses killed a man and then hid the body. Despite all that, Moses became the great prophet of the people of Israel, the one God used to deliver the people from slavery. My friend liked this verse because, despite his bad start, Moses recovered and God used him in a mighty way. It reminded her that, despite her past, God could use her too.

A bad start is oftentimes an indication of how something will end. When things get off to a bad start, often they're "doomed from the beginning," as we say. When something starts badly, it is hard to turn it

around, isn't it? Hard, yes; impossible, no. Moses is proof that God can help us recover from a bad start.

The Apostle Paul is another good example. We all know how God used Paul. He was the first great missionary of the church. He planted churches in city after city and helped them negotiate what it meant to be a Christian in a world that was hostile towards Christians. Many of the letters we have in our New Testament are letters Paul wrote to the churches he started. Oh, he ended well; we all know that. At the end of his life, he wrote to his young friend Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith...." He ended well, but that was only after he too recovered from a very bad start.

Many of you know that Paul was originally named Saul. We first meet Saul in Acts 7:58 where Luke describes him as "a young man." In this introduction to young Saul, Luke says that an angry mob laid their coats at his feet as they stoned a man named Stephen to death. Stephen was an early Christian leader in the church in Jerusalem. Saul was there to witness and, Luke says, to approve his stoning. Most likely the young Saul heard Stephen's prayer that day too. I can't help but wonder about the impact these words had on Saul. As the angry mob stoned him to death, Stephen prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

That's our introduction to Saul. He was a religious zealot who believed he was protecting his own religion. These new Christians were a threat to his beloved faith, and Saul was simply defending God and all things righteous. Here's how *The Message* translates Saul's behavior: "Saul just went wild, devastating the church, entering house after house, dragging men and women off to jail." Today we would call him a terrorist.

Now, that's a pretty bad start! In fact, I can't imagine a Christian missionary having a worse start than that.

So what happened? Well, what happened is the event recorded in our text from Acts 9, Saul's dramatic Damascus road conversion. What happened in Acts 9 is not only one of the great stories in the book of Acts; it is the event that turned Saul's life around. New Testament scholars suggest that the importance of this event is indicated by the fact that it is told three times in the book of Acts, here by Luke and then two other times (chs. 22,

26) by Paul himself. One scholar calls this Saul's "great reversal." (*NIB*, Robert W. Wall, p. 150) I prefer to call it Saul's "great recovery."

Luke says that Saul was still on a tirade, "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." He went to the high priest and asked for permission to go to Damascus, about 135 miles north of Jerusalem. It was to be a search and destroy mission. His intent was to arrest any who belonged to "the Way," an early description of the followers of Jesus, and bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he approached Damascus, perhaps anticipating with pleasure the misery he would soon bring upon the unsuspecting Christians, suddenly a light flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Okay, you familiar with the Old Testament see something important here. When God called the great leaders of the Old Testament, their names were called twice. "Abraham, Abraham." "Jacob, Jacob." And as he stood before the burning bush—"Moses, Moses." This was Luke's way of saying that God was calling another great leader.

Listen to the question. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?" Saul had persecuted Christians, the church, remember? On the road to Damascus, Saul learned an important lesson: to persecute a follower of the Lord is to persecute our Lord.

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. He used the title "Lord." We don't know if that was an acknowledgement of faith or respect, like the word "sir." Most likely it was the latter, "sir," because Saul didn't even know who was speaking. The voice replied, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." And then Saul received these instructions, "Get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

This must have been quite a spectacle for Saul's traveling companions. They heard the voice too and saw no one, except Saul. They watched him pick himself up off the ground. They saw him open his eyes, eyes that now were blind. And look at this picture. They took terrorist Saul by the hand and led him, like a child, into the city of Damascus. Luke says that Saul was blinded for three days and that he neither ate nor drank.

Man, what a story. The man who approved of Stephen's stoning, who went wild and drug both men and women off to jail, the religious zealot

whose mission was to search and destroy the disciples of Jesus was suddenly passive and helpless. That is how Saul, the enemy of the church, entered the Kingdom of God.

That's what it took for Saul to become Paul. That's what it took for Saul to recover from his bad start and become the church's first great missionary.

Now, here's the good news of this text for you and me. There's no start that's so bad that we cannot recover. None. Not murder. Moses proved that. Not persecuting the church. Saul proved that. The good news of our faith is that there's no start that's so bad you cannot recover from it.

I talk to people regularly who can't seem to believe that. They are slaves to something they did in their past. They're not just being dramatic either. It was bad. Egregious. If I mentioned some of the things, you'd wince. So the issue is this: is it possible for that person ever to be freed from that?

Have any of you ever heard of the radio program *Unshackled*? It's mostly on a.m. stations late at night. It originates from the Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago, the oldest continuously operating mission in the country. When I was in seminary, a friend and I went to Chicago to study the mission. For over 130 years, it has taken in millions of homeless men and women, the mentally ill, the destitute. Many are running from the law or someone seeking revenge. The radio program *Unshackled* features, in dramatic fashion, the stories of some of these men and women. An angry young man runs away from home, falls in with the wrong crowd, makes all the wrong decisions, and ends up destitute on the streets of Chicago. Or a girl can't wait to get away from home. Desperate she leaves in the middle of the night, has to sell her body, and ends up destitute on the streets of Chicago. These people always make their way to the home of last resort, the Pacific Garden Mission, where they hear the message of forgiveness and hope. There they are embraced by loving arms. They get a hot meal, clean clothes, medical and dental care. There these who got off to such a bad start find a way to recover.

It is possible to be free from whatever you did. Saul learned that spiritual conversion is not something we do. It is the work of Christ. It

comes as a gift and bears the power of forgiveness of the past and of hope for the future.

That is good news indeed. There's no start that's so bad that you cannot recover. None. Thanks be to God!

Closing Prayer

Lord, someone here has gotten off to a bad start and needs to recover. Help that person to enter your Kingdom like a child. Amen.