

*The Story: Life Interrupted*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Psalm 33:10-19, Galatians 1:11-24, Acts 13:42-14:7*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 13:42-14:7. Listen now to God's Word. "As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders. The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, where they continued to preach the good news."

Our eight-year-old son Jackson recently came home from a friend's house with a new knock-knock joke. He said, "Knock knock," and of course I said, "Who's there?" He immediately said, "Interrupting cow. MOOO!!" Now three-year-old Cameron loves the joke, but he can't say the word "interrupting," let alone understand it. So he goes around telling the joke simply as, "Knock knock? Who's there? Cow. MOOO!!" The more I've thought about it, though, that's the exact truth about interruptions. They don't come announced. They simply happen. And in our society, it's still one of the few taboos left. Interrupting someone is still seen as rude. We hate interruptions. We have more and more gadgets and gizmos that interrupt us, which makes it all the worse.

The only kind of interruption that people don't mind much is one that's truly important or newsworthy. Nobody minds if your dinner is interrupted by fireman telling you that the kitchen is burning down and you need to get out. For as much as we hate having our television shows interrupted, very few people seemed to mind the president's announcement this last week about Osama bin Laden. And sometimes, we need to be interrupted, we need to be distracted, so that we can step back and take a look at what's going on around us. We can get so focused on what we're doing or focused on our own perspective that an interruption actually gives us the opportunity to see the world with fresh eyes.

That's what happened with the apostle Paul. His life is the perfect example of someone whose whole perspective is interrupted by God, whose life is utterly changed as God gets in the way. And as Paul walks in faith with God, other people's lives get interrupted by the message of the gospel. The key issue for them – and for us – is how they react to God's divine disruption.

When we first meet Paul in the New Testament, he's known by a different name: Saul. As one of our readings this morning mentioned, he was dedicated to the Jewish faith. He had surpassed many of his contemporaries and was becoming a standout amongst the Pharisees despite his youth. And when the Jesus followers gained a significant following among his people, Saul became indignant. He actively participated in hunting down members of the church. He was there holding the coats of those who stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He went around having Christians arrested and imprisoned. In the book of Acts, Luke describes Saul as “breathing murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.” He went so far as to have the high priest issue letters to the synagogues so that he could haul Jesus followers back to Jerusalem to have them put on trial. From our perspective, this was awful persecution – but to Saul, he was proving his righteousness. He was showing how good he was, how deserving of honor amongst his people and with God. We don't know exactly how long Saul's persecution of the church lasted, but it was brutal enough that he was known and feared throughout the early church. Saul described this in our second Scripture reading this morning.

Then God gets ahold of him. Saul's on the road to Damascus, heading to the synagogue there to flush out the church, when a blinding light appears to him and his traveling companions. From within the light comes a voice asking Saul, “Why do you persecute me?” The voice is identified as that of Jesus. When he stands up from the ground, Saul is blind – and his traveling companions who heard the whole thing but saw no one speaking to Him are amazed. They go into the city, and a man named Ananias is sent by God to minister to Saul and restore his sight.

Saul is a changed man. Soon, he's preaching in the synagogue the truth about Jesus. He's baffling his fellow Jews who cannot believe this is the same man they'd heard about as their great defender against this new sect. In fact, he's so convincing and so good at converting the people to Christianity that the Jewish leaders in Damascus plan to kill him, and the Christian community has to sneak him out at night through a basket lowered through a hole in the city wall. He eventually travels to Arabia and then back to Jerusalem, where the apostles aren't sure what to make of him. Nevertheless, the testimony of his friend Barnabas convinces them that Saul's conversion is genuine. Pretty soon, Saul starts being known as Paul by those in the church.

Eventually, Paul and Barnabas set out as missionaries. They go from synagogue to synagogue, first proclaiming Christ to any of the Jews who would listen. Once that door closed, they would preach to the Gentiles in that region, opening up the Scriptures to them and helping them understand that the promises of God were now open to them as well. They typically stayed in a city until they were called by God elsewhere or were forced out by the local populace. That's the pattern we heard in today's last Scripture reading. As their journeys progress, Paul writes letters to various churches, strengthening them in their faith, encouraging them to stay faithful and warning them that their freedom in Christ was not a license to sin but a call to pursue righteousness and holiness.

This morning, I want us to look briefly at what it means for our lives to be interrupted by God. Is Paul's story the normal one, or should we be looking at the lives of those Paul interrupted with the gospel of Jesus Christ? And have we allowed ourselves to be interrupted by what God's doing?

Here's the first thing I saw in my study of Paul's life: *when God interrupts, it's usually a surprise*. The first thing I saw in Saul's conversion story is just how out of the blue it really is. Nobody ever saw this coming – it's the reason that even though they'd heard reports, the followers in Jerusalem were so wary of Paul at first. One day he's the head prosecutor for the church, the next its lead defender. But looking back at the whole biblical story we've studied over the past months, we see this is often the case. Abraham, Moses, David – all guys minding their flocks when God touched them. One learned that he would be the father of a nation, another the liberator of that nation, the third that nation's king. The prophet Elisha was a farmer. Three of the disciples were fishermen, another a tax collector. But when God calls them, He transforms them into servants He can use.

If God caught them by surprise, then He certainly threw the Gentiles for a loop. For the Jewish people, there was an “us and them” mentality – anybody in the world who isn't a Jew is a Gentile, somebody outside the plans God has for the people He had chosen. The Jews typically kept to themselves even when they lived in areas outside of Israel. So for the God of the Jews to suddenly be reaching out to the Gentiles through the Christians was unexpected, to say the least! The insiders club was suddenly open to the general public. Anyone who feared God and turned away from sin towards Jesus could be saved. Talk about a shock!

And when God interrupts our lives, it's just as shocking. Keep in mind that God often interrupts those who are already following Him as well as those who aren't. Abraham and David were living righteous lives. Saul, for all the pain he caused the church, was living according to Jewish law. You can be in the church your whole life and still not have had God truly break into your life in a meaningful way. We often go about our lives and God is a part of them, but God isn't the center of them. We might pray when we think of it, we might volunteer our time on occasion, we might even give a little of our money. We build our careers, we raise our families, we watch our TVs, we go about our lives. And if that's all there is, even if God and church play a part, if we give ourselves enough time to really think about it, we long for something more. But we don't expect anything else. We expect that this is all there is, even in our faith. And I'm here to tell you there's something more. God wants to be more than just a part of your life – He wants to be your life. He wants everything you do and are to spring out of Him. And while it may be surprising, even scary, when He gets in the way of your own plans and purposes and takes center stage in your life, let Him do it.

Now the second thing I noticed studying our readings: *when God interrupts, there's a mark left behind*. When Saul in essence became Paul, when he was converted, his whole life changed. But we also know that, by his own admission, he was given a “thorn in his side.” We don't know exactly what it was, but God allowed this thorn to exist because God told Paul, “my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” We have some clues as to what afflicted Paul. He dictated his letters, and then he signed them to authenticate them – and he comments on how big his writing is! We aren't certain, but it appears that he had sight problems. While he was healed after seeing the glory of Jesus on the road to Damascus, part of it always stuck with him. And not only that, Paul left behind all the glory and honor he had received among the Pharisees to become a Christian. That too left a mark.

But plenty of others have the marks to show for God's emergence into their lives. Some faced persecution, as Barnabas and Paul did. Others gave up their livelihoods to follow Jesus. A large contingent of those who practiced sorcery came to Christ together and burned their magic scrolls – valued in total at more than five millions dollars in our money. Gentile believers stopped buying and selling idols. Christians in Corinth, a city known for debauchery, stood against the tide of their city.

Now all of those marks sound difficult and painful, and they are. But God also leaves another kind of mark when He gets deeply involved in our lives – marks of the Holy Spirit. This morning's passage told us that when the Gentiles became believers, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord. In fact, the Greek is more emphatic than the translation – literally, they were rejoicing and praising God's Word! They were excited in the midst of their call to become Christians. When Paul and Barnabas were persecuted and kicked out of the region, it says they were “filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.” When the apostles were flogged for speaking of Jesus, Scripture tells us they “rejoiced because they had been found worthy of suffering disgrace for the name [of Jesus].” In the midst of the hard marks of discipleship comes the even greater marks of love and peace and joy and forgiveness.

The marks are different for each and every person because God knows our deepest heart and the things that are holding us back from Him. When I was called to serve in Russia for a year, I went engaged to Catha – our plans were put on hold for God's plans, and that was really difficult for both of us. The day I was called to full-time Christian service was the same day I learned the call center I was managing would be closing in a few months' time. Preparing for ministry meant giving up other career plans and financial stability. I cannot tell you how glad I am that God moved in my life for those things to happen, even though at the time there was pain involved. As I go to rehab for my knee three times a week and do two hours of exercises every day, it's not pleasant – but I know that the end result is worth the work and pain required.

Maybe God is knocking at your heart, asking for you to step out in faith and to trust Him. Maybe He's calling you to reach out to a group that's difficult for you to relate to. Maybe He's telling you to step into a new job or role that challenges you. Maybe He's speaking to you to quit a sin that has long plagued you. Maybe He's asking you to give up something that you enjoy because it's become your idol. God is wanting to do wonders in your life, but the marks of it are going to show, and they are going to be painful at first. Perhaps you've resisted God because you are afraid of what those marks might look like.

And yet Jesus knows all about being marked for our sake. The marks in His hands and feet and side prove to us that He was willing to suffer for us, even to die for us, so that we might be able to experience the marks of the Holy Spirit, to be able to share in the grace and love of God. We may be asked to suffer in order for God to use us completely, but the rewards will be generous, and our ultimate reward will be an eternity spent with Christ our Savior. Don't fear. When you are tempted not to follow Him, remember that Scripture says, “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” Trust Him to guide you when He is interrupting you and asking you to go beyond what you can do in your own strength.

And that leads us into the final thing I saw in my study this week: *when God interrupts, there's always a choice*. In Saul's case, God showed him the error of his ways. But there's a big difference between no longer persecuting the church and becoming the lead apostle to the Gentiles, traveling the known world and facing all sorts of scrapes to bring Christ to the lost. Paul chose wisely. And thousands of others chose wisely too. They put their pasts behind them, they got rid of the things that held them back from God, they laid down their lives for God's purposes, and God used them in mighty ways.

But the book of Acts also records how many rejected God's word. The cost was too great; the price too high; the faith required too much to ask. And usually, those who refuse God's interruption are the ones angriest with God's messengers. We see the Jews who will not turn to Jesus badmouthing the Christians to the Gentiles, trying to stone Paul and Barnabas, inciting the upper echelons of society against them, because of their intense jealousy. Their acceptance of Christ would mean that they, the Jewish people, were no longer God's chosen people alone...that was too much for some. But don't get the idea that they alone fought against God's plans. In the Gentile world, it was just as bad. The metalworkers in Ephesus created an uprising because the Christian converts were no longer buying statues of the goddess Artemis. In Lystra, the Greeks couldn't accept this Jesus fellow and called Paul and Barnabas Zeus and Hermes. On another occasion, the owners of a possessed slave girl had Paul and his friend Silas imprisoned because when they healed her, she no longer told fortunes for money. In each case, it was clear that God was at work, but some would not turn to Him.

We see this in our own day as well. The best-seller lists are full of folks trying to disprove God or, at least, downplay the value of religion. The mere existence of suffering convinces some that God can't exist. And most of the members of the "new atheist" movement are angry – they blame faith for society's ills; they condemn the church for its failings; their fervor against belief is like a religion in itself. And I believe that it comes not from a casual disregard for God but from a choice when God called to them. And God still calls them. It's my prayer that God will move in their hearts like He moved in the heart of Paul.

Just because we come to church doesn't mean that we've made a decision yet. God may still be knocking on your heart – maybe for the first time so that you might come to Him and receive His forgiveness, or maybe for the umpteenth time to ask you to dedicate yourself to being His full-time follower. Somewhere in your life, God is interrupting your plans, making Himself known. He is waiting for you to say yes. Yes to the Spirit, yes to His marks, yes to His cross, yes to His life, yes to His love, yes to His redemption and salvation, yes to discipleship, yes to suffering for His name, yes to giving all, yes to eternal life. I encourage you: don't say no when God shows up unexpectedly. Saying no enough leads to bitterness, to anger, to a life where we question God at every turn and may give up on God entirely. Don't be like those who chose to fight what God was doing. Let Him have His way in you. Are you willing to do that today?

This week, I encourage you, take a fresh look at what God is doing. Examine yourself and be brutally honest – where is it that I'm not letting God come in and do His work? Am I letting Him interrupt my routines, my schedule, my life? Saul was interrupted on the road to Damascus, and the change that God made in him altered the course of human history. His letters written to the church are considered holy scripture, inspired by God. You may not become a Paul, but God will make you into His good and pleasing servant...if you let Him interrupt you with the perfect plans and dreams He has created just for you.