

"When God Speaks"

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First Presbyterian Church Kingwood

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Bill Hybels, is Senior Pastor at Willowcreek Church in South Barrington, Ill. He is an avid sailing enthusiast. In his book, *Walk Across The Room*, he tells a story about one of his sailing experiences: He had put into a harbor on the Wisconsin side of Lake Michigan. After mooring there, he had an urge to go to a campground, just ten miles away. It was the place where he first gave his life to Christ. He called a cab company, but no one was willing to go so far out of the way to help him. The cab dispatcher finally came up with an idea – a guy she knew would do anything to earn a few bucks. She gave Bill the man's phone number and he made the call. Sure enough, he was desperate enough to come out and take Bill to the campgrounds.

On the trip, they chatted about a lot of things, and Bill was very generous to the guy – not just paying him for the trip, but also filling his gas tank. When they got to the campground, Bill hiked the few hundred yards to a hill where he stood for 10-15 minutes. It was the very spot where he had given his life to Christ. He thanked God for the way his life turned out. Then he returned to the beat-up old truck and his new friend.

Not two minutes into the trip back to the marina, Bill says, the guy "looked over at me. 'What was that all about?' I glanced over at him as he stared at the road ahead. 'Me standing on the hill over there?'

'Gotta admit it's a little weird,' he said.

'I thought you were going to meet someone here or something. But you went to all this trouble just to stand alone on the side of a hill. What's that all about?'

'You really want to know?'" Bill asked. "When he nodded, I told him that I wanted to come stand on the exact piece of land where I met God.

'Really.' He disguised his cynicism well. 'And how exactly does something like that happen?' he asked.

I went on to explain how I'd had the most powerful experience of my entire life on the side of that hill. I told him how I had grown up hearing about God and learning about church but that I'd been on a self-improvement plan for years, always hoping to set righteousness records to earn my way into God's good favor. "Everything changed for me on that hill – it's the place where I learned that all of what I was trying to achieve would never get me into a relationship with God."

Bill goes on: "My comments sat in the air for a few seconds as I waited for some response that would tell me to keep talking. Suddenly, he piped up. 'Well ... then how the hell do you?'" Bill explained to him what he had done many years before and what it meant to him then and now. "As I finished my story, I couldn't help but wonder where he stood with regard to spiritual matters. The silence that ensued was broken by his heartfelt words. 'Look at me, though. I'm a loser. I'm just a loser. I mean, can something like that happen to someone like me?'

What a holy moment, I thought as I collected my thoughts. “First of all, you’re not a loser,” I assured him. “You’re anything but a loser. You’re so important to God that he’s been pursuing you since the day you were born. You can have the same relationship with God that I found in my late teen years. It can happen to you anytime, anywhere. If you accept his gift of grace, you will be made new, and he will guide your life for the rest of your days.”

When we arrived back at the marina, I handed him a handsome sum of money and thanked him for his willingness to help me out. As he prepared to leave, he said, ‘I never would’ve guessed that today would turn out like it did. Thanks for saying what you said to me. You know, there’s a pastor starting a new church right beside where I live. He keeps coming by my apartment, saying this church presents the gospel message in a new way and that I might actually like it. The pastor’s a pretty good guy, I guess, but I’ve been too stubborn to go. This weekend, maybe I’ll check it out.’”

As I climbed aboard the boat in the early evening hours, ... my mind was preoccupied with so many questions. What was that all about, God? Why was I prompted to go visit the camp today of all days, after being in this harbor so many times before? Why did I persist when the cab company said no? Why did I agree to call a complete stranger to see if he would haul me across town? And why on earth did I get into a truck like that? The whole premise of Bill’s book follows up on those questions: When God opens a door, or presents an opportunity, make the most of it for him.

As we saw in the Old Testament reading, God spoke to Samuel. It took him four tries before he got through to Samuel, but, with Eli’s help, Samuel realized what was happening and when God spoke the fourth time, Samuel listened and obeyed.

In a similar way, God spoke to me. You can read some of the story in the Journey newsletter that just came out. But God spoke to me like he did that guy Bill Hybels met. When I saw teens who had a spiritual something I didn’t have, I wanted it. It was then that I began to sense that God was calling me to ministry– even though I almost failed Public Speaking in College. As I looked back, I could see how He was preparing me to be a pastor and preacher.

As we think about Saul in our text today, we can see the beginnings of what some call his conversion. Others scholars say it was more of a surrender to God. You see, if we look back at the end of chapter 7 of Acts, we find the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders, stoning to death a disciple of Jesus named Stephen for preaching about Jesus. There was a young man there at whose feet they laid their garments while they were heaving stones at Stephen to kill him. That young man was Saul. Surely, he must have been touched in an unusual way by Stephen’s prayers during his stoning and his request of God to forgive the men for what they were doing to him.

At the beginning of Chapter 8, we are told Saul, later to be re-named Paul, , began to follow the lead of those Pharisees and started his own persecution of the church. So here we have Saul, the Pharisee’s Pharisee. He had been trained by the best of the Jewish leaders. He knew the Torah backward and forward. He knew what was right and he knew that these followers of The Way, these Christians, were wrong. They weren’t just a sect of Judaism, like the Sadducees, they were absolute heretics! Being so knowledgeable in Hebrew teaching, Saul was out to set things right.

We are told at the beginning of Chapter 8 that on the day Stephen was stoned to death, “a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except

the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. . . . But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.” (Acts 8:1b, 3 NIV)

Then, in our text today, we find Saul going off to the city of Damascus to round up the Christians there and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial. In an amazing and powerful way, Jesus himself meets Saul. But He doesn't just come alongside of him and start walking and talking with him as He did with the two disciples on the Emmaus road just after his resurrection. This time, Jesus really shows His power. There is a flash of light and Saul is knocked to the ground and Jesus speaks to him, calling him by name: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

Notice, Jesus did not say why are you persecuting my followers? He said, why are you persecuting me? Clearly, persecution of Christians is a direct persecution of Jesus Himself.

You heard how this episode played out. Saul gets up, dusts himself off and prepares to go on to Damascus. The men traveling with him, “heard the sound but did not see anyone.” (Vs. 7) We are told they are speechless. They apparently knew something powerful happened, but didn't know what. Once Saul gets up, he discovers he is blind. So the men lead him to Damascus to rest up.

Now, Saul, the man we now know as the Apostle Paul, has had two very powerful and very different encounters with Jesus. First, he watches Stephen being murdered for preaching about Him and hears him begging God to forgive those who are killing him. Then he is knocked on his butt and spoken to by Jesus Himself. The text tells us Saul questioned the voice asking “Who are you, Lord?” “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. Then Saul was given his orders: “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

Now, you've probably heard people talk about their “Damascus Road experience.” Some folks have had a really powerful in-breaking into their life by the God of the universe. Some folks think that if you haven't had that kind of encounter you haven't really met Jesus. You know something friends? That's just wrong. Many people have had gentle nudges like I had. A realization that what I claimed to be my Christian faith was just a claim, but not a commitment to Jesus of my life, my all. When I made that commitment, my life changed completely. My Damascus Road experience did not involve lightning and a voice from the sky. It did involve my eyes being opened to what can be – in a life committed to Jesus.

Now, back to Saul/Paul. He is stunned. He is perhaps, traumatized. He is led into the city where he does not eat or drink anything for three days. This guy is in shock! He has had the most amazing experience that has turned his whole world upside down. Not to mention altering significantly his entire theological belief system!

In our text, we have a second story that plays out. I want to switch now and look at that one. In Damascus, there is a disciple of Jesus named Ananias. He, too, hears from the Lord. He is told to “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.” “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

Think about this poor guy, for a moment. He's panicked! He is being told to go call on the one man he fears more than any other. But, Ananias has a conversion experience, too. He hears the voice of the Lord and accepts what he is told to do and goes to find this Saul of Tarsus – the Christian's worst enemy. Ananias learns to put aside his prejudice and go and help Saul regain his sight.

You know, it's tough to pray for your enemies. It's even tougher to go to be with them when you pray for them. But that's what Ananias had to do. In his vision, however, Ananias learned that the Lord had plans for Saul/Paul to become a great leader of the Christian church and that the man he was going to heal would, himself, have to suffer for his faith.

Ananias had to be struggling with his own inner feelings as he went to Straight Street looking for this guy, Saul. But, he went as God told him to. The prayer he prayed was a simple one, just one sentence: "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

The powerful thing was that Ananias called him Brother Saul. He accepted him as a new brother in Christ. Paul had to know that this man was quaking in his boots, shaking with fear. After all, Saul had a terrible reputation among the Christians. But, just as Saul had witnessed Stephen forgiving those who were killing him, so now this Ananias was forgiving him and accepting him as a brother. Wow! Is that powerful, or what?

The power and sincerity of that prayer also brought healing to Saul. We are told that, "Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again." We've all heard of miraculous healings. Many of you have probably prayed for yourself or someone else to be healed in a miraculous way. I believe the power of this particular prayer is in the fact that the Lord Jesus directed it. He told Ananias to go pray for this sworn enemy of Christians. When Ananias obeyed, even though he thought maybe God had lost it, two miracles happened. Saul was healed of his blindness in his eyes and Saul was healed of his blindness to the person of Jesus Christ. We are told at the end of the reading that, after Saul was healed, he got up and was baptized. He joined the ranks of those he had been persecuting. This all came about through the power of a simple, one sentence prayer. Of course, God had been working in the background preparing both men for this powerful moment.

I believe the lesson for all of us in this text is: When God speaks or nudges or motivates us in some way, we need to listen and obey. You see, God spoke to Bill Hybels and he met a man who needed to know that God loves him. God spoke to me and helped me see that there is more to the Christian faith than simply saying I am a Christian. God spoke to Saul, later renamed him Paul, but helped him see the power of forgiveness. He spoke to Ananias and helped him see how obedience to God's will can do amazing things.

We never hear about this man, Ananias, again. But I suspect he heard a great deal about the work that Paul was doing – all as a result of his being obedient, putting aside his fears and trusting Jesus.

So, let me ask you this: When God speaks, are you willing to listen? When you feel a nudge to go through that door, speak to that lonely looking person across the room, strike up a conversation with the person next to you on the bus or with a cab driver –

who may be a Muslim – will you follow God’s lead? Say a brief prayer asking God for guidance and to say the right thing, and plunge in. Start a conversation and see where it might lead.

As you prepare to come to the Lord’s Table this morning, I would encourage you each to say a little prayer asking God to help you see the next opportunity a little more clearly and have the faith and courage to start that conversation – the conversation that could lead another person to be a life long friend; and which could mean the difference for them between life forever with God or without God.

Prayer: Gracious God, you speak to us in many different ways and in many different circumstances. Help us, we pray, to hear your word to us and know when to follow, who to speak with, how to show your love and forgiveness. Help us in these moments, as we prepare to come to Your table, to think over our relationships and know who you would have us start a conversation with to lead them into your presence. In Jesus name. Amen.