

THE STAGES OF FAITH 1:
“From Agnostics to Apostles”
Acts 9: 1-19

While on Sabbatical last summer, I spent some time thinking, praying and reflecting on how a person moves from being an unbeliever to becoming a fully functioning follower of Jesus Christ. This 2-part series is the result of that thinking.

A couple words of caution and a couple of hope as we begin. I know this effort will not be the last word on this subject; these 2 sermons are just a reflection of my current thinking along these lines. I know that anytime you set something out in steps or stages, there will be ‘exceptions’ and anomalies along the way. Not everyone follows a precise pattern of progression, some take divergent paths, and some of us skip around, and some of us move back and forth, and some of us are stuck on certain stages, and some of us find ourselves in or on more than one stage at a time. I admit that going in, can you live with that?

But you also must know my hope. I hope through these two sermons to help each of us identify somewhat where we are on the stages of faith...so we might be moved to move to the next stage before us! I have a secondary hope that as we discuss these stages we might also be inspired to see friends and family members who need to move on to their next stage; and I hope we might learn more how to be effective tools God might use to help them make those moves.

Those cautions and hopes identified, let me set the biblical context for our thinking. This week and next we’ll be looking at the conversion experience of the Greatest of all the Apostles as our model for understanding. From Acts 9 we read The Apostle Paul’s story, in two parts; verses 1-19 today, and 20-31 next Sunday. Let us begin:

¹Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath. He was eager to destroy the Lord's followers, so he went to the high priest. ²He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them--both men and women--back to Jerusalem in chains.

³As he was nearing Damascus on this mission, a brilliant light from heaven suddenly beamed down upon him! ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" ⁵"Who are you, sir?" Saul asked. And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!" ⁶Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

⁷The men with Saul stood speechless with surprise, for they heard the sound of someone's voice, but they saw no one! ⁸As Saul picked himself up off the ground, he found that he was blind. ⁹So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. He remained there blind for three days. And all that time he went without food and water.

¹⁰Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord!" he replied. ¹¹The Lord said, "Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you arrive, ask for Saul of Tarsus. He is praying to me right now. ¹²I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying his hands on him so that he can see again."

¹³"But Lord," exclaimed Ananias, "I've heard about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! ¹⁴And we hear that he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest every believer in Damascus." But the Lord said, "Go and do what I say. For Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. ¹⁶And I will show him how much he must suffer for me."

¹⁷So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you may get your sight back and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸Instantly something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized.

¹⁹Afterward he ate some food and was strengthened.

The great Apostle Paul in this text highlights the transition between the first 3 stages of faith that we will consider today. We'll also make note of what action is required at each stage, and also what event or circumstance that God might use to prompt us to move from each of the stages. Are you ready?

1. STAGE # 1: THE UNBELIEVER

Whether you choose the term agnostic (someone who denies that God can be known or understood), or atheist; (somebody who denies that God exists), or unbeliever, each generically describes this first stage of human existence.

To think of Paul as an unbeliever is almost unthinkable. He certainly wasn't an Atheist, nor was he an agnostic. He was trained in the finest Jewish schools of religion at the feet of one of the most respected rabbi's. He was a devote Pharisee, who circumspectly kept the law. Yet on his journey to destroy the 'followers of the way', on the road to Damascus he encountered "The Way, the Truth and the Life"! He was an unbeliever when it came to Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God; and my, how his life changed.

All humans begin their spiritual odyssey toward heaven on this stage. Unfortunately, some never leave this stage. Our world is filled with people who do not know, and many who do not believe that Jesus is the Way. This is where we must begin. What might it take for a person to move from this stage to the next? What action is required at the stage of unbelief? I believe, that even before a person can move to the next stage they must first make an **Admission** or at least express some **Openness**.

As I have said before, no one worries about being found, until they admit they are lost. No one can receive the gift of Jesus Christ who is not open to doing so.

And what event or circumstances might cause an unbelieving person to want to become a believing person? Again, I believe it will take either a **Crisis**, or a **Relationship**. Let me try to explain.

That admission or openness often comes as a result of some crisis in our lives, and not all crisis' are negative. There are many positive events in our lives that might qualify as crisis' if we look at them that way. That's why I like doing weddings, and baptisms, and even funerals; people are more open to God's spirit and influence at times like those.

But admission and openness can also be fostered through relationships with other persons authentically and contagiously living out their faith. Few of us become believers on our own. Most of us had a loving parent, caring friend, passionate preacher, or a committed neighbor who inspired and introduced us to the notion that living with Jesus is better than living without him! It is that simple! And that is the first stage. I wish we had more time to delve more deeply...maybe I should have done a sermon on each stage...next time!

2. STAGE # 2: THE SEEKER

We don't see much of this stage in the life of Paul, he didn't have much opportunity for 'seeking' between the time the lightning bolt hit him and he hit the ground! But most people do. Most people spend at least some time considering the decision they are making before becoming a Christian. And we, who have already made that decision, must be patient while they do. In fact, we maybe ought to be more intentional than that.

A few years ago it become popular for churches to become "Seeker Sensitive". It's sad it had to become fashionable before many churches began what we should have been doing all the time. Being seeker sensitive is best described as structuring your lives and ministry in ways that make what you do approachable for those who don't yet know Jesus. It's not about watering down the message, but altering the methods in which that unchangeable message is presented and modeled. We have done many things here at First Church to make what we do more accessible for those who don't know all the language, or all the details. It is sometimes a delicate balancing act to meet the needs of those already in the fold, and those just trying to find their way in!

There is some action required at this stage also. I believe most of it might fall appropriately under the heading of **BEING HONEST**.

I have often said, especially to young people who are seeking for faith, that God can handle an honest search, even honest doubt. It is dishonesty that so ticked off Jesus, as we have recently observed in the parables he taught. Honesty is always an admirable quality, but it becomes essential as one seeks to find Jesus. There can be no pretense, no pride, no possessions, no prejudice, no personal preferences when it comes to discovering what in intimate relationship with Jesus looks like or feels like. Honesty is the action to get to the next step.

And what events or circumstances might make one want to become this honest with God? I'm so glad you asked! I think there are at least 3, (probably more) reasons why a person might want to seek after God. Here are my top three answers:

- a- a **BROKENNESS** BECAUSE OF SIN
- b- the **PROMISE** OF FORGIVENESS
- c- or the **HOPE** FOR SOMETHING BETTER

When we come to an awareness of our sin, and realize that forgiveness is available, then there is the hope of something better in this life. We don't get honest with God just to get something better, but to be someone better, to be forgiven, to be set free from the bondage of wasting our lives, and the burden of being sin sick! That's what happens at stage two, and it can't be skipped over, it cannot be ignored.

3. STAGE # 3 THE BELIEVER

The third stage is becoming a believer. It gets tricky here, so please stay with me. When one comes to the end of ones seeking, a decision is made to accept God's forgiveness, and receive Jesus as the Savior and Lord of our life. When one comes to the end of ones own self the next stage is commitment or belief. When one comes to the end of ones personal resources as the only hope for a meaningful life, one becomes a believer in Jesus Christ, a Christian. Now here is the dangerous part.

This is what is required to go to heaven. Believing in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Savior of the World, the Lord of all life, is the required step every person must make to become a Christian, and venture to heaven...BUT...it is not the last step as we'll discover next week, this is a two-part series. I want to utter another cautionary word.

Many are the 'believers' who occupy many church pews, who are stuck on this stage. Oh, they may have settled the issue of salvation long ago, but they have never moved beyond stage three. There are even some churches that advocate this is it, get saved, and its over, that's it, finished, done, complete. But Jesus did not finish there, Paul did not stay in Damascus with the believers gathered there, no there is more. If you know you are saved...but are having some disquiet in your soul, or lack of fulfillment in your life, or an absent passion in your person, you might be stuck at this stage, and we'll address your need more next week. But for now we must look at the action required to get to this stage before we address the malady of being stuck on this stage.

What must a person do to become a believer? I think one word will serve us here: **SURRENDER!** To become a believer we must surrender our life, our will, our heart, our mind, our body, and our soul to Jesus Christ. It sounds so hard, but it's not! One simply declares, usually publicly, "I will end my selfish living, and give my life to Jesus Christ." "I will cease to live only for my good pleasure, and begin living for God." I will give up chasing that which will never satisfy for that which will never fail to satisfy." I give up, I give up.

Our surrender is typically predicated on one or two circumstances that result from our being forgiven, and our hope for something better, they are:

- a- a **DESIRE** TO GO DEEPER WITH GOD
- b- a **HUNGER** OR **THIRST** FOR GOD

Becoming a believer is not a mystery in the sense that it is beyond our ability to comprehend it. It is a mystery in the sense that we cannot accomplish it by our own will or energy or action. We simply surrender, because we want to be born again, and begin living a new life, seeking a deeper walk with God.

I was born and raised in a UM Church; I didn't make it every Sunday, but most. I was president of the UMYF group as a Jr. in High School. But one night, in the American Legion Hall, the light went on for me. It was no lightning bolt, just a simple realization that my ordinary life, could become extra ordinary. I prayed a halting little prayer, and Jesus came into me. I don't know how it happened, I don't know why it happened then, I didn't know what had drawn me; I just knew...I was different... immediately.

Like the Apostle Paul, I came face to face with the Lord, and I surrendered my life to Him. I went from being an unbeliever, to a seeker, to a believer, all in one evening.

I know there are some of you on each stage here today, and I would like to pray for you as you seek the wisdom, will and willingness to...move to the next stage...so let us pray.

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...”As he was nearing Damascus on this mission, a brilliant light from heaven suddenly beamed down upon him! ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?” ⁵“Who are you, sir?” Saul asked. And the voice replied, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! ⁶Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”...

1. STAGE # 1: THE _____

Action required at this stage: _____ or _____

Event/Circumstance that might prompt that move:

- a _____ or a _____

2. STAGE # 2: THE _____

Action required at this stage: _____

Event/Circumstance that might prompt that move:

- a _____ BECAUSE OF SIN

- the _____ OF FORGIVENESS

- or the _____ FOR SOMETHING BETTER

3. STAGE # 3 THE _____

Action required at this stage: _____

Event/circumstance that might prompt that move:

- a _____ TO GO DEEPER WITH GOD

- a _____ or _____ FOR GOD