**Reality Strikes**

Recently I was playing basketball up at the Y and feeling pretty good about how I had been playing lately. My shot was on target, I was getting lots of rebounds, I felt like I was moving well, and I had plenty of energy to keep going with the young guys. I’m certainly not a threat to anyone in the NBA, but for my context, I was playing well.

Then a young guy showed up who seemed to have a handicap. He had suffered a birth defect that left his right arm deformed and much smaller than normal. He got in a game and was on the other team from me so I guarded him. He tore me up.

* He handles the ball better than I ever could.
* He jumps right out of the gym to collect rebounds way over my head.
* He was dropping three-pointers at will.
* And if I tried guarding him against the three-point shot he went around me like I was standing in honey.

Reality has a way of reminding us of our limitations.

The same thing happens to me in golf. A few years ago I was playing the best golf of my life when I played on a championship course. A championship course is designed to inflict pain on amateurs.

* It’s longer than what I’m used to.
* There are more trouble areas that punish a missed shot.
* The rough is a lot deeper which means a shot that missed the fairway requires the skills of a Jedi to recover.
* I probably don’t need to tell you my scorecard looked more like I had been bowling than golfing.

That’s life. Just when you think you have it all together, reality strikes. It brings you back to earth. It turns out I’m not a good basketball player or golfer. Who knew?

I’m pretty sure I’m not alone in this. You’ve probably had moments when you thought you were getting good at something – then someone came along who is much better, or you found yourself in a situation that was much more difficult to navigate than you’re used to.

That’s life. No matter how good you are, there’s always someone better, or there are contexts in which you just can’t seem to do what you used to do.

One of the leading characters of the Bible had just such an experience. When we first meet him he’s called Saul. We’re never given an indication of his age, however it seems he was a young man. He was young but he was a real up-and-comer among the Jewish religious leadership.

His credentials were spectacular.

* His parents had him circumcised when he was eight days old. This is a tradition and law that goes all the way back to Abraham, *For the generations to come every male, when he is eight days old must be circumcised*. Genesis 17:12 It was repeated as a permanent law in Leviticus 12:3

It’s clear from this that Saul was truly a Jew, a son of Abraham. Ishmaelites were circumcised on the 13th day. Neither was he a proselyte, that is a Gentile who had become a Jew.

Saul was born into the Jewish faith and had known its privileges and responsibilities from his earliest days. He observed the rites and ceremonies. He was absolutely a Jew.

* He was of the people of Israel. This was racial thing. They used this expression to stress their special relationship with God.

Israel was a special name given to Jacob after he had physically wrestled with God in Genesis 32. The reason it matters is that the Ishmaelites traced their lineage to Abraham - through Ishmael, the son of Hagar. Edomites also traced their lineage to Abraham through Esau, Jacob’s brother.

Only Isrealites could trace their lineage to Jacob, whom God chose between the two sons of Isaac. Being of the people of Israel meant that he was absolutely pure of race and descent.

* He was of the tribe of Benjamin. That made him an elite Jew.

The tribe of Benjamin had a special place in the aristocracy of Israel. Benjamin was the child of Rachel, the wife Jacob loved, and the only one of the twelve sons who was born in the Promised Land. The first king of Israel came from the tribe of Benjamin. Saul had been given the name of that king.

When Israel divided into two nations, Benjamin is the only one that stayed with Judah. When the Jews returned from exile it was Benjamin and Judah that formed the nucleus of the reborn nation.

When Israel went to war Benjamin led the way. Their battle cry was, “*After you, O Benjamin!*”

The Feast of Purim commemorated the deliverance brought about by Mordecai, Queen Esther’s uncle. Mordecai was of Benjamin.

To be of the tribe of Benjamin would be like someone in America today that could trace his lineage to one of the original pilgrims, or to the Kennedy’s or Rockefellers.

These things Saul got from birth. He was a God-fearing, law-observing, pure blood Jew who belonged to the most aristocratic family.

Saul also had credentials as a result of his own achievements.

* He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. Let me explain that.

Historically the Jews had seen several dispersions. That is they were scattered from their homeland. So there were Jews in every town and city, tens of thousands in Rome, over a million is Alexandria. They refused to assimilate with the nations where they lived especially keeping their religion except for one thing. Usually they forgot their own Hebrew language.

To be a Hebrew of Hebrews meant to be a pure blood Jew and to have retained the language. Saul was so loyal a Jew that even though he learned Greek language, he still spoke fluent Hebrew.

* He was trained as a Pharisee. Being a Pharisee meant being Jewish on steroids.

There weren’t many Pharisees, no more than 6,000. The name meant *The Separated Ones*. They kept themselves religiously pure, unlike the common man. Saul had studied under Gamaliel. So revered was he as a teacher that he was called *Rabban*, *Our Teacher*, as opposed to *Rabbi*, *My teacher*.

Saul was not only a pure Jew, he was devoted to the most rigorous observance of the Law. Also, as a Pharisee he was far ahead of other men his age.

* So into the Jewish religion was he that he prided himself as a persecutor of the sect called Christians. Such zeal was a highly valued badge of honor among the Jews.

At least five times in the New Testament he confesses that his zeal led him to murder men and women who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. He knew Judaism at its most intense and fanatical level.

* He was beyond criticism concerning obeying the Law. He called of himself, , a word that means not only did he not violate the Law, he did everything the Law prescribed to do.

These were Saul’s credentials. From birth and by achievement he was the best of the best. There's no way God could not be pleased with him. He knew that one day he would hear the words, *Very well done my good and faithful servant*.

But, something happened to him. He became complacent. He was so good he didn’t need spiritual growth. He didn’t need to tune in to sermons at the synagogue. He knew the most. He did every religious thing expected and then some. He was the ideal Jew. He had spiritual life figured out.

Then, as so often happens, when Saul thought he had it all together, that he was the best there is, reality strikes.

While on one of his mission trips, this one to Damascus to put a stop to this plague that threatened the life of Israel, this ungodly belief that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, Saul, in his own words, was “*apprehended by Jesus*.”  means to capture someone or something to make it your own.

If you’re new to Christian faith you may not be familiar with this account, however most of us know that this is the story of how Saul, the chief persecutor of Christians, turned around and became a champion of the cause which, up to that point, he tried to exterminate.

*Saul was breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”*

*“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.*

*“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” He replied.* Acts 9:1-6

A while back when I was reading this text it occurred to me that this was a reality striking Saul. Here he was, “*The World’s Best Jew*” fighting against the very God he worshiped because he failed to recognize God. So God had to get his attention in a drastic way.

* *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*
* *Saul, Saul, you’re so good at being religious, why do you fight against me?*
* *Saul, Saul, you’re the best. Why do you not recognize me?*

A bit of irony, Saul was also called Paul. Paul mean small one. This big man in the faith was actually a small man because he wasn’t listening to God.

The problem was that Saul was so good at religion, he quit listening to God. He did all the right stuff. He didn’t need spiritual growth. Teaching was for younger people or the less initiated. He almost missed the most important lesson he needed to learn.

*Salvation doesn’t come because you’re the best. Salvation comes by God’s grace through faith in Jesus. A man should never become complacent and stop listening to God*.

All of that is just the introduction for a simple lesson. *Salvation doesn’t come because you’re good at Christian stuff. Salvation comes by God’s grace through faith in Jesus. Never become complacent and stop listening to God*.

Last week I talked about how people are often changed by a significant event or experience even while others are unchanged by that same experience. This morning I’m thinking of people who are changed but who over time become complacent, satisfied that they have it all together and they don’t need to pursue spiritual growth anymore.

I’m not accusing anyone, but I know this is a common problem so I think it’s worth thinking about. It’s possible that you have become like Saul.

What are your Christian credentials?

* You were born into a Christian home, so you learned Christian stuff from your earliest days.
* Your family has always been involved in church. If the church was open you were there: Worship, Sunday school, youth group, revivals, whatever was going on you were involved.
* Your parents were leaders: SS teachers, Elder, Bible study leaders…
* You learned the Ten Commandments, the books of the Bible, the Fruit of the Spirit…
* You showed up for work days

Like Saul you had family heritage and personal achievements that established you as one of the best at being Christian.

Quite simply, you’re pretty good at the Christian thing. But maybe, like Saul, you’ve become complacent and stopped listening to God. You’re doing right things the right way. You don’t need spiritual growth. Teaching is for younger people or the less initiated.

Again, I’m not accusing anyone. I just want you to think about it because reality has a way of striking to remind us that we don’t really have it all together. A serious illness; an unexpected death in the family; a huge financial loss; being downsized out of a job.

Just when you think you’re doing everything right, you get hit. Maybe it’s not bad luck or happenstance. Maybe it’s God trying to get your attention. Maybe it’s like the alarm going off in the morning waking you from a deep sleep.

Nobody likes being awakened that way. Nobody likes having God shake us out of complacency either.

* *Rod! Rod! Why are you not listening to me?*
* *Darlene! Darlene! Why are you not obeying me?*
* *Marvin! Marvin! Why are you ignoring my Word?*
* *Darrel! Darrel! Why are you disrespecting my church?*

Insert your name and your particular issue in which you’re not doing what you ought to be doing or you’re doing what you ought not to be doing.

Maybe that streak of negative life events is God reminding you that you need Him; that you’re not good enough on your own.

* Maybe what you call “suffering” is actually a reality check.
* Maybe God’s trying to break through your complacency in order to get you back to hearing Him.
* Maybe He’s trying to remind you that you’re not good enough on your own. You still need Him.

My message today is simple: God doesn’t want us to become complacent. He wants us active and involved in Him. He wants us ever open to His leading.

I believe it’s a natural tendency to think we’re pretty good. We’ve been doing this Christian stuff long enough, we’ve got this. That complacency can actually cause us to miss God when He speaks to us, just like Saul missed God in Jesus.

The cure for complacency is also simple.

1. Be involved. That’s a choice you make.

* Participate in a Bible study. We have at least seven.
* Listen to every communion meditation and sermon with an ear to hear God speaking to you.
* We offer several Bible studies on Sunday morning but most of us don’t take advantage. God speaks to us through those studies.
* Listen to the announcements. God may be calling you. One of our Sunday school teachers wasn’t planning on being a teacher. One Sunday morning she was listening to our announcement that we needed teachers. She felt God was calling her. If you ask her she’ll tell you that absolutely was God calling her to a most rewarding adventure.

1. Don’t be satisfied that with where you are in your spiritual relationship. Pursue growth.
2. One more idea. Change things up. Change the way you do your Christian life. Don’t change the Gospel. Change your approach from time to time so that you don’t find yourself in a rut that leads nowhere.

General Mills started making a new cereal in the late 1940’s. They called it Wheaties. It was good, but it wasn’t particularly popular. So they took a big financial risk and did something nobody else had ever done. They paid big money to Olympic gold medal pole-vaulter Bob Richards and put his picture on a box. With this popular athlete gracing the front of the box, their new slogan was, “*Breakfast of Champions*.”

It worked. Wheaties became an overnight success and has been near the top selling cereals ever since. But they didn’t stop with Bob Richards. They continually find new athletes that people know. As the years go by, people forget names and accomplishments. Who remember Bob Richards?

To introduce the cereal to new people, they change the outside of the box to be more relevant to the day. But not once during all this time, did they ever change the cereal inside the box! It has remained unchanged.

I’m not suggesting that anyone change what you believe, unless of course what you believe is not the truth. I don’t want you to change the truth. The Gospel doesn’t change.

I do however encourage you to change the way you do things. Keep it interesting. Keep growing. Keep learning. Keep listening for God. He wants to be involved in your life.

Don’t let yourself fall into a routine that God has to do something drastic shake you out of complacency.