

When My Old Faith Fails

1. Warm up question. What's the funniest (or most annoying) thing you've seen on social media lately?
2. Sunday's sermon was prompted by someone who asked, "What should a person do when they begin to question all they've learned about the Christian faith . . . because of a life-altering event that both awakens them and breaks them?" For some people, a faith crisis may occur when they embrace a new view on subjects like women preachers or LGBT affirmation, then begin to wonder what else they've learned about God that's wrong. For others, a faith crisis may arise from a traumatic life event, like the death of a loved one, or when they are deeply hurt by a spiritual authority figure or church community. When in your life has your faith been most challenged?
3. The spiritual journey of Saul – who ultimately became known as the Apostle Paul – offers insights into how we might best respond to a faith crisis in our own life. Saul had been raised in a sect of 1st century Judaism known as Phariseeism. The Pharisees believed that the essence of spiritual life was keeping all the detailed rules found in the Mosaic Code. But then along came Jesus, who questioned many of the rules and hung out with many nonobservant people – even claiming that many nonobservant people were far more likely to enter heaven than those who observed all the rules. When the followers of Jesus kept pushing this "Jesus heresy" after his crucifixion, Saul decided he wasn't going to stand for it. He became a leading persecutor of the Christians, until one day something stunning happened. Read Acts 9:1-9.
 - a. Why do you think the Christians made Saul so angry? Why was he so obsessed?
 - b. When Saul began pursuing, identifying, and rounding up Christians, he got to see many of these Christians up close and personal. Jeff suggested that as Saul saw the beauty of their lives – gentleness, courage, faith, love – he probably began to experience powerful cognitive dissonance. Do you buy that? (If you're an LGBT Christian, has anyone ever experienced that with you?)
 - c. If you were to depict Saul's experience on the Damascus Road in a movie, how would you present it? Describe what you see happening in your mind's eye.
 - d. Verse 8 says, "Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing." Have you ever had an experience that was so stunning it "opened your eyes," but still left everything fuzzy and unfocused for a while?
 - e. What do you think Saul was thinking and feeling in the immediate aftermath?
4. Saul's encounter with Jesus shattered his old framework for thinking about God. In the book of Galatians, we get a glimpse into the process by which he rebuilt and reconstituted his faith. Read Galatians 1:13-2:10.

5. According to what we just read, the first thing Saul – now Paul – did after his disruptive vision of Jesus was to retreat into the Arabian desert, then spend the next 14 years in obscurity in remote places, before launching his epic missionary journeys. From this we learn an important lesson: ***When our belief system is disrupted, it takes lots of time to reconstitute our faith. Like Paul, we should be patient with that process.*** Why is time so important to recovering from a faith crisis? Why is it so hard for us to be patient with that long process?
6. To help us be more patient with times of spiritual uncertainty, Jeff reminded us that doctrinal clarity is not the highest goal of spiritual life. Many of us have been taught the opposite, i.e., that the most important goal of spiritual life is orthodoxy, i.e., “correct doctrine.” By contrast, the New Testament book of First John teaches that orthopraxy – “correct action” – is the most important goal.
 - a. Read I John 2:3-11 and 4:7-8. According to these verses, what is the most important sign that we truly “know” God?
 - b. Read Luke 10:25-37. Keep in mind that, in Jesus’ view, Samaritans had a confused theology (John 4:19-23). Yet in Luke 10, Jesus makes a “doctrinally confused” Samaritan the hero of his story, while two orthodox believers (the priest and Levite) are the villains. What was it that the Samaritan had right?
 - c. No matter how accurate our doctrine is, we finite creatures will always fall far short of a complete understanding of God. The Persian poet Rumi said, “Stay bewildered in God and only that.” What do you think he meant?
 - d. Exodus 20:4 says, “Thou shalt not make for yourself any graven image.” Jeff suggested we violate this commandment when we carve our doctrinal understanding of God into stone. Do you agree or disagree – and why?
7. The second lesson we learn from Paul’s recovery from his faith crisis is: ***He had to be willing to dare to ask any question.*** That meant summoning the courage to ask whether the core of his old faith – salvation through rule-keeping – was wrong. He concluded it was, and instead embraced a radical gospel of grace as the new core.
 - a. Some of us have learned to think that there are certain questions about God we must never ask for fear of being disrespectful or faithless. Have you ever been in an environment where questions were not welcome? How did that feel? What’s the downside of being in that kind of environment?
 - b. Are there any core spiritual questions you’re pondering right now in your faith journey? If so, what are they?
 - c. When John Kavanaugh asked Mother Theresa to pray he would find clarity, she refused. Instead she said she would pray that he would find trust. Why do you think she refused to pray for clarity?

Next week we launch into a new sermon series, “Great Questions Of Faith.” Invite a friend!