

## **GOD KNOWS HOW TO ARREST YOUR ATTENTION!**

**Today's Text: Gal. 1: 10-24**

### **Extracts:**

**But I make known to you, brethren, that *the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ. ... But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter [Gal. 1: 11-18]***

*Ben Bell had been looking for a policy job for more than two years.<sup>1</sup> He had worked on the Obama re-election campaign in 2012. So, recently, he tried to get a job with the Obama administration. He and his family even joked about making a job pitch to the First Lady, Michelle Obama. On Thursday, April 24, 2014, Mrs. Obama held her annual question-and-answer session with the children of Executive Office employees. Ben's 10-year-old daughter, Charlotte, sat in the front row- her mother was an executive branch employee. She stood up and told Mrs. Obama that her dad had been out of work for three years. Stepping forward, she handed the First Lady his résumé (CV). Taken aback, Mrs. Obama explained to the other children who had no idea what Charlotte had told her, that it was a private matter concerning the questioner's unemployed dad. At the end of the session, she embraced Charlotte and took away her dad's résumé.*

*Our interest in that story is how Charlotte arrested the attention of the First Lady for her father's cause. She might or might not succeed but she got the attention of someone she could use to advance her purpose. God does that quite often to those whose skills, talents and gifts He wants to use to spread the gospel, especially as we approach end-times. We may have been told of the mission that God has for us. Most times, we are too pre-occupied with earthly pursuits to make ourselves available. Sometimes, we think that we have time because we are still young and need to first "be established" before accepting the call. But God knows how to arrest our attention! Ask Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles, that God arrested on his way to persecute believers in Damascus. We have so much to learn from his experience.*

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<sup>1</sup> Story is based on: Nancy Benac, "First lady gets resume from girl with jobless dad," April 25, 2014; <http://news.yahoo.com/first-lady-gets-resume-girl-jobless-dad-165211665--finance.html?vp=1>

## 1. Background: Jesus arrests Paul's attention!

As the children of Israel approached the territory of Moab on their way from Egypt, the Moabites became exceedingly afraid. So, Balak, their king, sent for Balaam for help [Num. 22: 1-5]. Balaam was a soothsayer [Josh. 13: 22] or a sorcerer [Num. 24: 1] who used his spiritual gifts for profit [Jude 11]. Whomever he blessed was blessed; whomever he cursed was cursed. So, Balak wanted him to come and curse the children of Israel. He sent the princes of Moab to Balaam with a diviner's fee [Num. 22: 6-7]. Curiously, Balaam told his visitors to wait till the following morning and he would bring them the word that the LORD would speak to him. I had thought that diviners used satanic powers to do their dirty works! Perhaps, Balaam was the precursor of many prophets in our congregations today who use their spiritual gifts for private gain [1 Tim. 6: 9-10].

*God came to Balaam that night and warned him not to go with the visitors because he should not curse the people whom He had blessed.* The princes brought the bad news back to Balak. He responded by sending more numerous and more honourable princes, and promised a more handsome reward if only Balaam would come with his emissaries. Sanctimoniously, Balaam placed more value on the word of God than on the gold and silver that Balak could ever offer him. Yet, he asked the visitors to tarry for the night while he sought more clearance from the LORD. God said to Balaam, *"If the men come to call you, rise and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you- that you shall do"* [Num. 22: 8-20].

"If the men come to call you" is different from "Since the men have come to call you." Therefore, God's permission implies a third group from Balak, not this second one. Understandably, therefore, God was angry with Balaam when he went with them. It was time to arrest his attention! The Angel of the LORD, that is, God in visible form, with a drawn sword stood in the way as an adversary to Balaam but only his donkey could see Him. As the animal turned into the field from the way to avoid the Angel, Balaam struck her. *Thrice the donkey tried to avoid the Angel and thrice the visibly angry Balaam struck her. Then, the LORD opened the donkey's mouth and it spoke to her master! It was at that stage that God opened Balaam's eyes and he saw the awesome figure! Immediately, he bowed his head and fell flat to the ground, saying, "I have sinned, for I did not know You stood in the way against me. Now, therefore, if it displeases You, I will turn back"* [vv. 21-34]. From that point on, Balaam did only what God commanded him to do. His attention had been arrested.

Right now, you may be at a crossroads in your walk with God. You may be torn between going all the way, as God has commanded, or to wait a little longer because of some material benefits that you cannot let go or some doubts you still entertain about your calling. Like some disciples of Jesus in those days, you want to follow the Lord wherever He goes but only and only if He will first let you go and bid farewell to your fancies and fantasies. But Jesus' reply is unequivocal:

“No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” [Lk 9: 57-62]. ***If God needs you for His purpose, you can run but you cannot hide! He will know how to arrest your attention.*** Let us hear what Paul has to tell us on the subject.

In this week’s Bible passage, Paul recounted to the churches of Galatia how he became the apostle of the Gentiles. He did not receive the gospel from man but directly from Jesus Himself [Gal. 1: 11-12]. Here is a summary of the rest of his story:

a) *His past*

Paul wrote, “You have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how ***I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it***” [v. 13]. Paul, formerly known as Saul, was a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee [Acts 23: 6]. He studied law [the Law of Moses] under Gamaliel, a respected teacher of the law [Acts 5: 34; Acts 22:3]. He was born a Roman citizen, that is, his father held Roman citizenship before he was born [Acts 22: 28]. Therefore, ***his zeal to make sure that the new faith (in Christ Jesus) did not germinate was strong and unparalleled.*** In his own words to the Galatians, “I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers” [Gal. 1: 14].

When Stephen was stoned to death, it was at the feet of a young man named Saul (Paul) that the witnesses laid down their clothes [Acts 7: 58]. Thereafter, ***Saul “made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison”*** [Acts 8: 3]. But God needed Saul’s zeal for His purpose!

Perhaps, by accident of birth or place or circumstances, you have found yourself in an adversarial relationship with God and Jesus. You may even have vicariously taken up arms against God. For example, just to win votes or to be politically correct, you are publicly defending abortion and gay marriage. You may be paying huge tithes on ill-gotten wealth. Such zeal is not for Christ, no matter how many communions you may swallow each week!

b) *His conversion*

Paul writes, “But ***when it pleased God ... to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles,*** I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood” [Gal. 1: 15-16]. If Paul could go on to persecute more believers after listening to Stephen’s eloquent testimony, then no human being would be able to get his attention. God had to do it by Himself!

Still “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” Paul went to the high priests to obtain letters from them, authorizing him to raid the synagogues of Damascus and bring the converts to the new faith bound to Jerusalem [Acts 9: 1-2]. But, as he came near Damascus, *a bright light suddenly shone around him from heaven and he was thrown off his horse*. Then he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” Paul’s response is intriguing. He asked, “Who are You, Lord?” The Lord replied, *“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”* Trembling and astonished, he asked Jesus what He wanted him to do. Jesus told him to arise and go into the city where he would be told what to do [vv. 3-6]. That was how God arrested Paul’s attention to “preach Him among the Gentiles” [Gal. 1: 16]. Wow!

c) *His spiritual education and impact*

We now know from Paul’s letter to the Galatians that he was led in spirit into Arabia. From there, he came back to Damascus. It was after three years (from the date of his conversion) that he travelled to Jerusalem to see Peter with whom he spent fifteen days.<sup>2</sup> Thereafter, he did not see any of the other disciples, except James, the Lord’s brother [vv. 17-19].

Indeed, Paul was “unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ.” Instead, they were only hearing of the man that formerly persecuted them; that was now preaching the faith that he had once tried to destroy. They glorified God in him [vv. 22-23].

Paul met the other disciples fourteen years later and they accepted him as the apostle to the Gentiles, just as Peter was the apostle to the Jews [Gal. 2:1-7]. Who else could have made such a smooth transition possible except God Himself? Now, God also wants to arrest your attention- whether you like it or not!

## 2. How God arrests your attention

Paul told the Galatians that God had separated him from his mother’s womb and called him through His grace [Gal. 1: 15]. But he hardly realized that until that fateful day on his way to Damascus when Jesus arrested his attention. In like manner, God has been calling you even before you were formed in your mother’s womb [Jer. 1: 4-5] but you may not have noticed it all this while. Here are some examples of how He has done it:

a) *Through your conscience*

We are made in the image and likeness of God [Gen. 1: 26-27]. Therefore, unlike animals and other creatures, humans have the ability to differentiate

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<sup>2</sup> He was taken there by Barnabas [Acts 9:27-28].

between good and evil [**Gen. 2: 16-17**]. So, whether we know God or not, there is something inside us that tells us if what we are doing is good or evil. We call it conscience for, as the word of God says, “The spirit of man is the lamp of the LORD, searching all the inner depths of his heart” [**Prov. 20: 27**]. So, God can arrest your attention through your conscience.

For example, until the time of Moses, the Ten Commandments had not been revealed to man. Yet, sin was already imputed in the generations before then. For merely being envious of his brother’s special place in God’s presence, the LORD warned Cain that sin lay at his door and he should strive to rule over the desire to hurt his brother, Abel [**Gen. 4: 1-7**]. When Lot tried to stop the men of Gomorrah from sodomising the “men” (angels) that he was hosting, they said of him, “This one came in to stay here, and he keeps acting as judge” [**Gen. 19: 1-9**]. Lot served as the conscience God tried to use to arrest their attention.

However, many people who are not keen on heeding such attention “kill” their consciences so as not to hear any warnings any longer. About such people, Paul warned Timothy, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, *having their own conscience seared with a hot iron*” [**1 Tim. 4: 1-2**]. Rather than degenerate to the point of being given up by God as reprobate minds [**Rom. 1: 28**], we should immediately realize that we have sinned and confess our sins.

b) *Through His word*

When Paul went into Arabia soon after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, what do you think that he went there to do? To be alone or savour the sands of the desert? I doubt. He was there to commune with God through a deeper study of His word. That was why he was able to write his mentee, Timothy, “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work*” [**2 Tim. 3: 16-17**]. That is why God sometimes uses His word to arrest your attention.

For example, Josiah became king of Judah at the tender age of eight years and he reigned for thirty-one years. At the age of 26, he commanded the temple to be repaired. In the process, Hilkiyah the priest found the Book of the Law which he sent to the king through Shaphan the scribe. Josiah commanded the scribe to read it to his hearing and “when the king heard the words of the Law, ... he tore his clothes” [**2 Chron. 34: 1-19**], that is, he repented. In the history of the Jewish people, we are told, “Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart,

with all his soul, and with all his might, according to the Law of Moses; nor after him did any rise like him” [2 Kgs 23: 25]. So, God can also arrest your attention that way! The word of God is spirit and life [Jn 6: 63].

c) *By disgrace!*

According to an African proverb, the ear that refuses to heed a warning will be cut off along with the head! See how a highly placed man like Paul was brought to his knees to acknowledge that he had been fighting a wrong (and losing) war! In like manner, some of us will not acknowledge God’s call or heed His warnings unless and until we are disgraced. See how highly placed men of God or politicians have been disgraced out of office for adultery, embezzlement or such-like sins. See how Peter was humbled after he had denied Jesus thrice. We are told, “So Peter went out and wept bitterly” [Lk 22: 54-62].

For example, Manasseh was twelve years old when he succeeded his father, Hezekiah, as king of Judah. He did evil in God’s sight. In spite of the long time that God gave him to change his ways ( he reigned for fifty-five years), he got worse. So, God allowed the Assyrians to bind him in bronze fetters and carry him into exile in Babylon. We are told, “When he was in affliction, he implored the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.” God heard his prayer and restored him back to his kingdom in Jerusalem. That was when he came to know that “the LORD [is] God” [2 Chron. 33: 1-20].

*We all cannot have Paul’s grace and it is not everyone that can recover from Manasseh’s disgrace. What is your choice? Like Paul, we are waiting for your answer!*

### 3. Conclusion: You have no place to hide!

The Psalmist has said of the LORD, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?” [Ps. 139: 7]. Jesus has added that without Him, we can do nothing [Jn 15: 5]. He will soon return to judge the WHOLE world, no matter what faith you may claim to profess right now.

You have no place to hide. You can run but you can no longer hide because time is up! It is high time you became attentive to God’s call. He knows how to arrest your attention for salvation or for judgment [Jn 3: 16-17]. Sooner than later, He will get you!