

# A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt Burleson

## “Your Evolution”

Acts 9: 36-43

May 2, 2004

A few years back, I was behind a car in traffic. The bumper sticker caught my eye. It said (with exasperated letting), “**EVOLVE DARN-IT!**” Only it didn’t say “darn-it.” I understood the sentiment and feel it often when I deal with my own humanity and when I see the world’s humanity. I’m exasperated and said amen.

But, a part of me wanted to pull up next to the car and shout at the driver, “**We are.**” You are, you know? Evolving! You are not what you once were... You’re not yet what you will be. You’re changing. Because that’s the nature of the universe and of you. Things evolve...

Just look at your Jr. High pictures. I heard a preacher friend once say, “**Your year book pictures will mock you plenty.**” (Alan Wallworth) A particularly true statement for those of us raised in the 70s. Lot’s of polyester with those pimples. Belled everything. Lot’s of pictures in leisure suits and big bow ties on the way to Homecoming.

You aren’t what you were, thanks be to God, things changed. You’ve changed, outside and in.

Ever read something you wrote years ago... and winced? “**I... thought that... and actually put it down on paper?**”

I was a bit of a bible thumper in high school, believe it or not. At my 25<sup>th</sup> reunion, several folks remembered that fondly. I’d, of course, repressed it completely. We evolve.

“**Life finds a way**” as they said in Jurassic Park. I like to think of it this way, we’re living in a personal universe with a personal God who knows us... and so life fashions for us the curriculum we need. Like... the Divine looks at you and knows where you need to be and the steps you have to take to get there.

The prerequisites you must take.

The experiences you must have.

The disciplines you must learn.

This is the way things are... they progress. If you’re paying attention at all. If you’re awake to the great Teacher and cooperate. You’ll find that the Divine is moving you along... usually one step at a time.

And you don’t have to get theologically silly with this and see God as a puppeteer and life is some static predetermined play. And everything that happens as “God’s will.” You don’t have to claim divine intervention for every parking place that pops open.

What you can claim is that you’re a part of a supernatural world. Where everything is connected... and everything is responding and reacting to everything else. There are natural laws... at work... You learned a few of them back and school, but most of them I’m convinced are beyond us and we haven’t even begun to be aware.

So in this great school that is evolving you... there is mysterious connection. And there is the luck of the draw... and there is synchronicity... and there is your will... a good bit of choice but a whole lot of chance. And there is loving, tender, Divine desire and there is powerful, omnipotent sovereignty. It's all in the mysterious mix.

And like any good teacher, God is using it all. Like a great cosmic Montessori teacher, God uses it all. And it all wants to be used. It's all organic... it's alive... and longing for your growth. Remember Paul's words, **"The creation is standing on tip toes waiting to see what becomes of you."** The world isn't benign.

There is a world responding and reacting to you... leading you. And the world's Maker... is bumping you along, if you're willing to be bumped.

Think back... about when certain people have come along in your life. Mentors, perhaps. The Sufis say, **"When the student is ready, the teacher shows up."** The person you need is there. The one who can nurture you or open another world up for you... shows up.

Or maybe it was not someone helpful but someone who drove you crazy. The monastics learned that the very person you have the most trouble with would show up in your community... as God's gift to you, because you had certain things to overcome and only they could push those buttons that needing pushing.

How do you learn to forgive without having someone who offends you in your life?

How do you learn to live without approval without having someone in your life who critiques or even condemns you?

Who's going to lead you past judgement but the one who disgusts you? How is the lesson of grace taught a part from being near one who doesn't deserve your love?

So people show up... and communities form around you.

Events take place...

Coincidences happen...

You intersect... collide and connect. You say goodbye, say hello. Get hurt, get over it. Have an epiphany... have a dry season.

But **"everything's more than it seems"**... it seems. (K. Wood's best line)

And... you are evolving. At least if you're willing.

Peter was.

Peter evolved. Can you picture Peter back in Galilee? A rural, ancient world that fashioned him. A family. A unique story.

He grew up on the lake and knew the lake. Knew where the best fishing was. Knew all the merchants and how to barter with them. He knows the nuances of every sunset and sunrise. He knows the waves well.

And he knows his faith well, his community taught him as all communities should.

Right from wrong.

Point by point.

Clean and unclean.

This is where he begins... as we all do, in some place, in some time. But things change. Who knows just how this began? Maybe he sat, nets in hand, and the thought just popped in his head one day that there might be more to life... Or maybe some radical came along and raised some questions about his faith and threw him for a tailspin. Or perhaps there was a crisis... even before Jesus came along and said, **“Follow me.”**

And when that happens, change that had been incremental moves into hyper drive and Peter’s evolution speeds up. He’s seeing things he never thought he’d see. Things that defy his understanding of the world.

He’s with people, hanging out with folks he’d hated. Matthew, one of his new colleagues, was his former Tax Collector. Matthew had stuck it to him for years... now they’re trying to be friends.

And then he’s watching Jesus, breaking some rules... hanging out with unclean people.

And he’s listening to Jesus, pray like none other. Pray in a way that really changed things.

A couple of years later... on the other side of a cross and an empty tomb, Peter barely recognized himself. Or was it that he felt more like himself than he’d ever felt? Either way, he was different.

Three years ago he was tending nets... and now he’s sitting on a beach with someone he’d seen die... And they’re eating fish together and he’s hearing this resurrected being say, not, **“Tend my lambs, instead of your nets.”**

Then Pentecost happens and Peter, the old sailor, stands up and preaches. Then this former back woods boy is up in front of the Supreme Court. Then he’s leaving Jerusalem. Everything is changing. And it keeps changing in chapter nine of Luke’s story about the church.

There are two miracles that take place. One of them is obvious. Peter shows up in Joppa at the request of some grieving believers. Apparently, they think maybe Peter might help their friend. When he arrives, she’s already dead... and Peter, as opened and evolved as he is, thinks, **“Well, what would Jesus do?”**

So he sends them out of the room. (Take note, faith healers, there’s no show here.) No telling what Peter’s thinking, there in that room... But he goes for it, **“Tabitha, wake up.”** And she did and that’s the first miracle.

You may not have noticed the second. It’s equally astonishing. Luke just drops this little line... he just sort of mentions. **“Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.”** That was the second miracle.

I suspect after the healing of Tabatha... the Christians all gathered around... Maybe they worshipped, then celebrated with a meal. Then someone said, **“Hey, we need to put Peter up... where’s he gonna stay.”**

**“Well, he shouldn’t stay with us... our baby’s got colic and she’ll keep him up with all that crying.”**

**“Well, we don’t have a bed, our son’s home from military service for the month.”**

**“We’re too poor... don’t even have a house.”**

Simon the Tanner, one of the newest Christians, raised his hand meekly. **“He can stay with me, I’ve got plenty of room... it would be my honor.”** So, it was settled... and they all went and broke the news to Peter. **“We’ve got it all worked out, you’re staying with Simon the Tanner.”**

And Peter turned white as a ghost.

Though he tried not to show it.

But he was nauseous at the thought at the thought of it.

See, a Tanner... for an orthodox Jew... was as unclean as unclean could be. He worked with dead animal bodies all the time.

He was ceremonially unclean and therefore, spiritually unclean and could contaminate other people.

A woman could actually divorce her husband for being a tanner.

This was on par with being a leper...

it was despicable.

So, Simon Peter’s head is spinning at the thought of going home with Simon Tanner. But he’s just had this miracle happening and he’s been preaching about the grace of God in Christ... and as repulsed as he’s feeling, he’s thinking **“what would Jesus do”** and some how he gets the words... **“Okay... that’s great,”** out of his mouth without being sick.

Peter goes home with this Tanner... every fiber of being, body, and soul protesting. You know how it is, when your gut’s a step behind you’re head. When your “want to” hasn’t caught up with your “ought to.”

Peter doesn’t want to but... But he goes... miraculously, he goes.

They get home... the place smelled... as did Simon. You ever cleaned and skinned and gutted a deer. Cleaned a mess of fish. The smell doesn’t leave. Scrub all you want... try to hide it with lemon juice... but you still smell. It’s under the skin.

Imagine doing that everyday. Peter had... and as he stepped across the threshold what’d he’d only imagined became a reality in his nostrils.

And Simon’s so humble and excited. **“Can I get you something to eat... the back porch is full, they just brought in some new kill this morning. I’m pretty sure we can find something fresh enough to eat.”**

**“Ah... no thanks... not really hungry.”**

Peter goes to bed hungry... He lays down with the “hibbie-jibbies”. Tries not to move. and doesn’t sleep much wondering if how he can make a move the next day. But he doesn’t. The two Simons become friends. And Simon the Rock sees the faith of Simon the Tanner... and his humanity. And he stays, and it gets easier.

And on the day he leaves... there’s only the sadness of leaving his friend. No more hibbie-jibbies.

He’d evolved. And it was a good thing because in chapter 10, a story some of you know, he’s going to have to take an even bigger step. Simon the Tanner was just getting him ready for Cornelius the Gentile... a centurion of all things.

Peter's going to have a vision, a dream from God, which invites him to move beyond and leave behind all those purity laws. And more importantly, Peter, by way of his experience with these spirit-filled gentiles, is going to become the point person in the church for the movement of inclusion. **God isn't ours, like we once thought. And the gospel knows no boundaries.**

People, who are willing, evolve. People, who are awake, are led to grow up and become. Peter was led along one lesson at a time... and so are we. Your world is a classroom fashioned for you.

What's around you just now?

Who has meandered into your life?

What person, what pain? What dream?

What challenge... is before you?

Maybe even something as awkward as a Bloody Tanner to a Kosher Fisherman? Maybe someone is there to bust open your stereotypes and lead you one step closer to Christlikeness. What "teacher" has shown up for you?

A number of years ago, I experienced this sort of movement in my life. I was reading late one night... some counselor who, of all things, had included a chapter in his counseling book on contemplative prayer. I read it and admitted to myself... **"That's not something I experience."** My prayer life was sterile and cerebral... and the world around me was pretty static.

The next day, I went and saw my pastor... I said, **"I've got to figure this stuff out or stop talking about it."**

He said, **"Me too... I've been thinking the same thing."** And he reached over and pulled out a devotional guide that I'm still using to this day, and said, **"I just found this, let's both start using this and we'll get together and talk."**

Not long after that, I had a conversation with a mentor over glasses of wine... brilliant, creative guy. We talked long into the night at the Crockett hotel in San Antonio and one topic led to another. It was the night before I turned 30... and I was surprised to find out that this mentor of mine believed deeply in faith healing... and often participated in laying on of hands.

A few months later I was waiting in the examination room for my doctor, reading some monastic work on the spiritual life... In walked my doctor, who was this jean-wearing, boot-wearing, longhaired... earthy guy.

Cussed like a sailor. I liked him very much.

He saw the book and said, **"Are you into the contemplative life? Me too. A few years back I was diagnosed with cancer and got ready to die... and God healed me. I love studying prayer now... reading the Saints. I wish I was a Catholic so I could go live at a monastery and communion with my Creator. Pray all day and s\_t like that."**

The static, modern, dualistic lid had, in a matter of months, been pried off my spirituality. I was evolving... or being evolved.

Would it not make life more interesting if you woke up everyday wondering what chance or providential thing was going to come your way, with your name on it, just so you might become what God made you to be?

If you're awake and if you're willing... God is wanting to grow you up. You're walking in an amazing world... living in a universe that knows you and is standing up on it's tip toes awaiting your becoming.

Who knows where this is going to take you?

What it's going to make of you?

Teach you?

Peter starts in a small fishing boat... and the tradition says he wound in the center of the known world... in Rome, as the leader of an exploding new faith. That's some evolution. Jesus had predicted it. "What you really are Simon, is a rock."

And down under The Vatican, down in the deepest place, under it all, acting as the foundation God made him to be, there is a grave marked with the name Petras.

Life will not leave you short of where God wants to take you. Life will not leave you less that God has made you to be. Wake up... pay attention... EVOLVE, DARN-IT.

(The idea for this sermon and insight into Luke's brief mention of Simon the Tanner, came from my good friend, fellow-pastor, golfing buddy and former "lackey", Chris Thacker.)

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