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The Acts of the Apostles
III. Cut to the Heart
Acts 2:22-41

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Robert Leon Davis was as convinced an atheist one could ever find. He grew up in the notorious Hollygrove neighborhood in New Orleans, raised by his grandmother, who was a devout Christian. She took him to church, made him memorize Bible verses, loved him with a powerful love straight from the heart of Jesus. Even after he left home and became an atheist, still he would hear her voice echoing in his conscience, saying, “*Do the right thing. Do the right thing.*” But Robert Leon Davis spent a long time doing anything but the right thing.

In 1975, he joined the New Orleans Police Department – but he was a dirty cop right from the start, abusing his power in all manner of ways. In 1979, he was arrested for one of these crimes, but never went to trial because he fled – he became a fugitive from the law. He spent the next twenty or so years on the run, living much of the time off the grid in the wilderness, committing more crimes to get money or whatever else he needed to survive. And it was during this period that he became, not just an atheist, but a passionate atheist. In his own words, he says, “*I hated God, I hated the very idea of God. I literally used to go and key cars that had bumper stickers that were Christian-oriented. I was a strict, strict atheist.*”¹

But God wouldn’t leave him alone. Throughout those years as a fugitive, God kept showing up – through his relationships with girlfriends who always turned out to be Christians, through a close friend he met in the woods who also turned out to be a Christian, through churches where he had to sit through sermons in order to get a free meal. He even, like Jean Valjean, spent time living with a Catholic priest, from whom he ultimately stole – not candlesticks, but a bunch of cash. Again, in his words, “*It’s like everywhere I went I had to deal with God, and that was very, very aggravating because each and every one of these instances where God was coming up, I’m thinking of my grandmother.*”² But Davis refused to let God get to him. He remained steadfastly hostile even to the thought of God.

Until one night in 2001. Davis was camped in some woods outside of Memphis – and, on that night, God turned up the heat through a very powerful dream. Davis was dreaming about his grandmother. He dreamed about her sewing clothes for him and his siblings when they were children. He dreamed about her cooking dinner. He says the dream was like a wonderful throwback – not just because of dreaming about happier days growing up in his grandmother’s house, but also because in the dream he was nothing like the man he had become. Instead, he was young again, good again, everything was okay again in his life. But then the dream changed. Just before he woke up with his heart racing and body sweating and mind in a confused state, he was

dreaming that his grandmother was standing before the throne of God and begging God to deliver her to Satan instead of him. It was so real to Davis at that moment. Looking back, he says:

*That's how she was. That's just the kind of love that she had. It shakes me up even today. She was saying in her soul, 'leave him alone and take me.' It seemed real, and when I woke up I was in a strange place. I can't really describe it. I think that was God hitting on the accelerator with me. I think he said, "Okay, I've given this guy 20+ years out here wandering in the wilderness and I think I'm going to close it down – let's get this show rolling now."*³

In other words, God used that dream to really get Davis's attention, at long last. God used that dream to cut Davis to the heart. And, cut to the heart, Davis at last turned around, turned back to God.

He returned to New Orleans immediately. In fact, he left those woods in such a hurry that he left behind his shoes, ran into Memphis barefoot and hitched a freight train heading home to New Orleans. And there he turned himself in, knowing full well he was facing a very long sentence – but also knowing full well that now that God had gotten him, he could run no further. The D.A. wanted to make an example of him, and was shooting for a thirty year sentence. But on the day of the trial, it seemed that God intervened again – because as Davis had met with mercy from God out there in the woods, so now he was met with mercy from the judge. The judge gave him the thirty years the D.A. wanted, but then suspended the sentence. Davis was a free man.

The judge had been impressed by two things – first, that Davis had turned himself in; and second, that he appeared genuinely sorry and repentant over what he had done. At one point, in fact, she had asked him if he was guilty of this crime. And he had answered her, “*Your honor, I not only did that crime but many other crimes*” – at which point, his attorney nearly passed out on the spot! And so she gave him a sentence of thirty years, but then immediately turned around and suspended the sentence. And Davis walked out a free man.

Or rather, a new man. The judge may have suspended his sentence, but it was God's mercy that was now powerfully at work in him, truly setting him free from his past, from who he had been and what he had become. In an interview, Davis describes the moment he left that courtroom:

It's hard to describe. All I can tell you is that, man, I felt like a newborn baby. That was the first time that I experienced joy in my life. That was when I really understood what joy means. Joy is not laughing or just feeling happy. Joy is like: I'm just so freaking grateful.

*It wasn't nothing I did. It was God's mercy. I don't need to believe that God was merciful to me – I know it.*⁴

And in the twenty plus years since, God's mercy has never stopped working in his life, on his life, even through his life. He still lives in New Orleans, teaching classes for the New Orleans Police Department, mentoring young men as a personal trainer – in short, now does everything within his

power to keep others on the right path, to share with them the love he first experienced from his grandmother and then, supremely so, in his relationship with God. But most of all, he hasn't stopped thanking God and speaking of God's grace to everyone he meets. God cut him to the heart that night in the woods, and now God has given him a new heart. *"I found God,"* he says, *"or rather he found me."*⁵

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Cut to the heart. Cut to the heart. Have you ever had an experience wherein God really got your attention, brought you up short, turned you around and upside-down – cut you to the heart and challenged you, claimed you, changed you?

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Peter was preaching to the large crowd that had gathered at the sight and sounds of the Holy Spirit descending upon the disciples -- and the disciples, in the Spirit, then speaking of the grace of God in the tongues of many nations. Someone in the crowd had yelled that they must just be drunk. Peter had stood up and announced that they were not – that what the crowd was witnessing was nothing less than what the prophet Joel had foretold about God sending His Spirit upon His people.⁶ And then Peter really got to preaching – or really got to meddling, as the saying goes. Because he then told the crowd that everything they were witnessing was because of Jesus of Nazareth – the man they had put to death upon a cross some fifty days before. And what he then declared to them just cut them to the heart. Peter tells them that this Jesus was none other than the Messiah sent from God – that promised king from the line of David that Israel had been waiting for, and for so very long. And that they, the crowd, they had put the Messiah to death. After providing proof for how he could be so certain that this was so – including the Resurrection and prophetic quotes from King David himself, Peter then drives it all home to the crowd: *"Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."*

"Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart." Cut to the heart. They had rejected Jesus, turned away from His miracles and signs, killed Him on a cross. But now, as it turns out, they had not managed to get rid of Him at all. Nor to get rid of His love for them, in spite of what they had done. God cut them to the heart with Peter's words – but not as punishment, but as an invitation to turn and to be healed. Not as chastisement, but as an opening to receive the Messiah's mercy. Not as final judgment upon them, but as a Christ given, Holy Spirit powered moment in which, if they are willing, they can be made new in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. *"Brothers"* – cut to the heart, they cry out to Peter and the others – *"Brothers, what shall we do?"* And Peter answers with the invitation to salvation:

Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.

Repent – now that God has gotten your attention, turn around and face towards God again. Be baptized – not that God has gotten your attention, let Him wash away every stain, every pain, every sin from your past; let Him wash you clean of what has been, of what you have been. Now that God has gotten your attention, receive the Holy Spirit – and so embark upon a new path, a new way, a new life; a new and better future opening up before you in the power of the Holy Spirit, which will lead you to life instead of death, into joy instead of despair, truth instead of falsehood. God cuts the crowd to the heart through Peter’s sermon – but only in order that He might then heal their hearts. In order that His Heart should receive them into His mercy and their hearts open to Him in thanksgiving and praise. That is what it means to be cut to the heart.

And God would do the same in us, for us. Indeed, God does the same in us and for us probably for more often than we are aware – if only we would, like the three thousand in the crowd that day, if only we would but receive His word. Because being cut to the heart does not always mean some catastrophic occasion, some dramatic confrontation, like that of Robert Leon Davis. Nor does it always involve a conviction of sin and guilt, as with the crowd hearing Peter’s sermon. God uses all sorts of moments and methods, small and large, to get our attention, to call us closer to Himself, to move us deeper into His grace, to cut us to the heart that our hearts shall be drawn ever nearer into His love for us. Cut to the heart moments are any moment, no matter how small or fleeting, where we can sense God is trying to get our attention – to break through our inattention to Him, to pierce through the distraction with which we veil ourselves from Him. Cut to the heart moments can be any moment in which we are invited to think a little more deeply about our life, to think a little more deeply about who we are and where we are going in life, to think most of all about the God who made us and who will not quit bothering us until at last He has got us, until at last we have Him.

For example, maybe it happens as we look upon our newborn child, and think about where this precious gift has come from and what it will mean for our living from now on. Or maybe it happens as we gaze down upon the open casket of someone we have loved long and deeply, and we begin to think about what this death means for our living, what death itself means for how we live now. Or maybe it is even simpler than that – a thought that comes unbidden and which captures our attention. Perhaps it is something someone says to us quite innocently in a conversation, which comes back to us and haunts us and causes us to think. Maybe it is just a sight we see, a wonder of nature we behold or a man-made wonder we encounter. Maybe it is something as annoying as the sound of our beloved snoring beside us in bed, which despite the annoyance causes a surge of gratitude and love and gratitude for the love.

Whatever it may be, somewhere God is behind it – beckoning to us, trying to get our attention, trying to convince us to turn aside and take off our shoes and ponder the burning bush of His mercy towards us.⁷ Willing us just to stop and turn towards Him, that He might wash us afresh in the baptism of His love, that He might lead us into a better and different future by a deeper infusion of His Holy Spirit into us. “*We are a circumference people, with little access to the center,*” writes Richard Rohr. “*We live on the boundaries of our own lives . . . confusing edges with essence, too quickly claiming the superficial as substance.*”⁸ Cut to the heart moments are moments when we sense that God Himself is the center of our existence – and that He’s calling to us, beckoning to us, inviting us to come closer to Him.

And when those moments come, the most important and appropriate and necessary thing that we can do is simply to let Him do just that. Let Him have our attention and see where He will lead us. Receive His Word and see what we might come to understand that we did not know before. Let Him cut us to the heart and see what fresh healing awaits our hearts in His care. That was what the crowd did on that long ago Pentecost day – and they were saved, three thousand of them. That was what Robert Leon Davis did in that lonely wood outside of Memphis – and he was made new, made truly free, made good again, just as in his dream, and ever since doing the right things. And that is what God would do in us, if we will but prove willing to let Him cut us to the heart.

¹ Quoted in Benjamin Self, “The Fugitive Comes Home – Interview with Robert Leon Davis,” The Mockingbird (Summer, 2023), p. 86.

² Quoted in Self, p. 92.

³ Quoted in Self, p. 93-94.

⁴ Quoted in Self, pp. 96-97.

⁵ Quoted in Self, p. 83.

⁶ Acts 2:1-21.

⁷ Exodus 3:1-6.

⁸ Richard Rohr, Everything Belongs, quoted in Amy Julia Becker, “Worshipping at the Church of Taylor,” Christian Century, Vol. 141, No. 1 (January, 2024), p. 74.