

Acts 9:1-22

¹ Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any men or women belonging to the Way, he might bring them to Jerusalem as prisoners.

³ As he went on his way and was approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

⁵ He asked, “Who are you, Lord?”

He replied, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you need to do.”

⁷ The men traveling with him stood there speechless. They heard the voice but did not see anyone.

⁸ They raised Saul up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could not see anything. They took him by the hand and led him into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he could not see, and he did not eat or drink.

¹⁰ There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias!”

He answered, “Here I am, Lord.”

¹¹ The Lord told him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. In fact, at this very moment he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he can regain his sight.”

¹³ Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many people about this man and how much harm he did to your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has authority here from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

¹⁵ The Lord said to him, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel. ¹⁶ Indeed, I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

¹⁷ Ananias left and entered the house. Laying his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, whom you saw on your way here, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

¹⁸ Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. ¹⁹ And after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul stayed with the disciples in Damascus for several days. ²⁰ Immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

²¹ All who heard him were amazed and said, “Isn’t this the one who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? Didn’t he come here for this very purpose: to bring them as prisoners to the chief priests?” ²² But Saul continued to get stronger and kept confounding the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

Life Altering

I.

God sure seems to pick a strange assortment of followers, doesn’t he? Last week’s Gospel spoke of the eleven disciples who remained of the Twelve close followers of Jesus cowering in fear behind locked doors. While Thomas was singled out as one who doubted, the rest of them doubted what Jesus had told them, too, or they wouldn’t have been cowering in fear that way. We mentioned the guilty consciences of all of them. It wasn’t only the public denials of Peter that caused rightfully guilty consciences; *all* of them had deserted Jesus and fled. Few found their way to Jesus’ trial, or to the foot of the cross to be their with their long-time Master.

While last week’s Gospel mentioned the disciples’ fears and guilt, the First Reading of the day,

from Acts, showed Peter as the spokesman for the disciples saying to the Sanhedrin and the high priest: “We must obey God rather than men... ³²We are witnesses of these things” (Acts 5:29, 32, EHV). Jesus had fulfilled his promise to the Eleven to send the Holy Spirit to them. Fear turned to boldness by God’s power.

This week’s reading from Acts shows something entirely different. “Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any men or women belonging to the Way, he might bring them to Jerusalem as prisoners” (Acts 9:1-2 EHV). Saul was not some timid follower cowering in fear behind locked doors in Jerusalem. Saul was not a simple fisherman or a hated tax collector, as many of the Eleven were.

Saul was bold. Saul was unafraid. Saul had the religious establishment on his side. Not only that, but he was convinced he was right. He was convinced that Jesus was a charlatan and a fake. Saul did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah but was, instead, someone who was leading God-fearing Jews away from the right path as they continued to look for the Messiah, who *he* believed was still to come. He wanted to stamp out this new Way so that people would be forced to follow the old way, which he was convinced was the right way.

II.

You are totally different, right? You aren’t filled with a righteous zeal to stamp out Christianity.

Later in his life, the man formerly known as Saul was called Paul. In his Letter to the Romans he wrote: “The mind-set of the sinful flesh is hostile to God, since it does not submit to God’s law, and in fact, it cannot” (Romans 8:7, EHV). He wasn’t just talking about his former self and people like him who were persecutors of the Christian church. Every single human being is born a sinner—with a sinful flesh—a sinful flesh that is hostile to God.

The Bible speaks about a person’s natural state in three ways; we discussed them in catechism class. A person is born spiritually dead, spiritually blind, and an enemy of God. Dead is very descriptive. One who is dead can do nothing on his or her own. There is no way you, as one who was dead, could choose God or ask God into your life. Spiritual blindness is descriptive, too. One who is blind cannot see a pathway to God. God the Holy Spirit must lead such a person to faith through the Means of Grace, the gospel in God’s Word and in the Sacraments.

The third one is the way the Apostle Paul described the natural self in that passage from Romans. Hostile to God means being an enemy of God. Not only does the natural self want nothing to do with God, it actively works against God and his gospel.

That’s the way every single one of us was by nature. That’s the way *you* were: an enemy of God who wanted nothing to do with God or his love.

III.

The Lord Jesus had plans for Saul. “Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ ⁵He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ He replied, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’” (Acts 9:3-5, EHV).

Up to this point in his life, Saul was an evil man. He stood around watching while Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian church, was put to death. He hated Jesus. He hated the group of people who were starting to be known as Christians. Saul was not just a *little* hostile to the Lord Jesus, he was filled with an active rage. He was an enemy of God and his church.

Perhaps it was a bit of poetic justice. The man who was spiritually blind was struck with physical blindness. But the Holy Spirit was hard at work with the Means of Grace. Jesus himself spoke to Saul: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

Then there is Ananias, who was called by God to restore Saul’s physical sight. Ananias had reason to be afraid. “Lord, I have heard from many people about this man and how much harm he did to your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has authority here from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name” (Acts 9:13-14, EHV).

After being reassured by God, Ananias went to see Saul. “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, whom

you saw on your way here, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:17, EHV).

The conversion experience of you confirmands was not so dramatic as that of Saul. No bright light from heaven struck you with physical blindness as a voice from heaven called out your name. There wasn't a three-day period before someone came along to restore your physical sight.

While it might not seem as dramatic, your conversion was no less miraculous. Your sinful human nature was washed clean in the waters of baptism. You were adopted into God's family of believers. God has the power to change the hearts of raving enemies like Saul, and little children alike.

IV.

After Ananias restored Saul's physical sight: “He got up and was baptized. ¹⁹And after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul stayed with the disciples in Damascus for several days” (Acts 9:18-19, EHV).

For every believer, coming to faith in the Lord Jesus is a life-altering experience.

The change takes place inside. From godlessness to faith; from unbelief to a conviction that Jesus is the Christ.

God makes the change, but God wants you to do something with it. In Saul's case: “Immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God’” (Acts 9:20, EHV). Saul had been a well-known persecutor. Both sides knew his name: the chief priests had commissioned him to round up those who followed Jesus, and the Christians knew he had been authorized to bring them in.

You confirmands know your Bible history. Saul became the Apostle Paul. Sometimes he is called the greatest missionary of all time. He worked as tirelessly *for* the Lord Jesus as he had once worked to *persecute* the Lord Jesus. Nothing could deter him; not even prison stopped him from continuing to proclaim the name of the Lord Jesus, whom he had once persecuted.

What about you? The question is not just for today's confirmands, but for all those who have been brought to faith, and then made their vows in confirmation to remain faithful to the Lord Jesus even until death.

Scripture says that by our fruits we will be recognized. It's all God's doing to bring each one of us to faith. He wants *you* to work with him actively. Share your faith. Proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God. Live your life as you are pledging to do today. Those who have been confirmed in the past, renew your confirmation vows today as you share the joy of these confirmands. Be bold to proclaim the name of the Lord Jesus.

The reading from acts concludes: “But Saul continued to get stronger and kept confounding the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 9:22, EHV). Saul continued to get stronger. This is also part of your active Christian faith. Stay in the Word. Use it in season and out of season. Rely on what God says, no matter what the social norms are around you.

In a few weeks, you won't be at Holy Trinity school. Your job, as the WELS Kids Connection videos say each month, is to “stay connected to Jesus.” Continue an active personal devotional life throughout the summer and into the next school year—and for the rest of your life. Be faithful in your church attendance, where you are fed with the Word of God with other strong confessional Christians surrounding you, and where you can feed their faith, as well. Be regular with your attendance at the Lord's Supper, which you will receive for the first time in a few minutes. Jesus has invited you to his meal as prepared Christians who understand that he has given his body and shed his blood so that you might have forgiveness of sins, and so that your faith might be strengthened in this Sacrament.

God bless you in your ongoing walk of Christian life. Amen.