Acts 9:1–22

**But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. 4And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” 5And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” 7The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.**

**10Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” 11And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, 12and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” 13But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. 14And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” 15But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” 17So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” 18And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; 19and taking food, he was strengthened.**

**For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. 20And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” 21And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?” 22But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.**

Revelation 5: 8–14

**And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, 10 and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”**

**11Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, 12saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” 13And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” 14And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.**

John 21:1–14

**After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. 2Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. 3Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.**

**4Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.” 6He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. 7That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. 8The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.**

**9When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. 10Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” 11So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. 12Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. 13Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. 14This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.**

**From Foe to Friend by God’s Grace Alone**

If you were selecting someone to serve as a character witness for you, would you choose your most tireless opponent? If you were selecting someone to care for one of your most precious possessions, would you choose someone who had repeatedly gone out of his way to work against your interests?

Choices like that might seem to defy human reason. Yet in today’s reading from Acts, we find our Lord making just such a choice, as Christ selects Saul, the persecutor of Christians, to be His chosen apostle to carry the Gospel of Christ to the nations.

In the earliest years of the Christian Church, it would have been difficult to find a more dedicated opponent of Christ than Saul of Tarsus. Paul supported the stoning of Stephen and rounded up Christians so they could be imprisoned. Saul did his best to destroy the Christian Church. And when the Christians in Jerusalem had been imprisoned or scattered for safety, Saul took steps to expand his reach against the Church. As we heard, Saul sought and received permission from the high priest to travel to Damascus, to arrest the Christians there and to bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment.

Jesus, though, had other ideas. Saul set out on the road to Damascus, but Christ met Saul on that road to set him free. Saul set out in malice, but Jesus met him in mercy.

Christ began by confronting Saul with his sin. The risen, glorified Jesus came to Saul in a flash of blinding light, and having brought Saul to his knees on the dirt of the Damascus road, Christ said, **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”**  In his blindness, Saul called out, **“Who are you, Lord?”** The Lord answered, **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”**

Although Saul’s physical sight was gone, he began at last to see things clearly. In persecuting the Church, the Body of Christ, he had been persecuting Christ Himself. And Christ, whom he persecuted, is Himself the Lord.

With that heartrending knowledge, Saul was sent by the Lord Jesus into Damascus. Over three days of fasting and prayer, he had time to consider what he had done and to begin connecting the Scriptures with the One he now knew those Scriptures testified about. Then the Lord sent to Saul a faithful man named Ananias, one of the Damascus Christians Saul had been intending to arrest.

Ananias came to Saul, laid his hands on him, and baptized him into Christ Jesus. Through God’s gift of healing, Saul’s eyes were opened to see, and through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, Saul was brought out of the darkness into God’s marvelous light.

Saul had been Christ’s enemy, but Christ graciously transformed him into a friend.

By God’s grace in Christ, Saul had been reconciled to God and then Christ sent Saul out as His ambassador to bring that same gift of reconciliation to the world.

Through Ananias, the Lord revealed His plans for Saul, to carry Christ’s name to the Gentiles. Now that Saul had been brought into the light of Christ, he would serve as Christ’s instrument to bring that light to the world.

In our Revelation reading we are reminded that Christ by His blood **“ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.”**  So from the day He rose, He set about broadcasting that good news to people from every background in every land.

And in His gracious wisdom, our Lord chose to send that message out to sinners through sinners. After all, who better than the forgiven to share the good news of forgiveness? Who better than a man like Saul, who could describe himself as the chief of sinners to speak the comfort that Christ is the friend of sinners?

So, beginning from Damascus, Christ sent His Gospel through Saul, also known as Paul, to places like Arabia, Asia Minor, and Europe. Along the way, Saul suffered greatly for the name of Christ, much like others had once suffered for Christ at Saul’s own hand. But through that name of Christ that he proclaimed, countless souls found light, life, and peace in Christ, just as Saul did.

Ever since then, Christ has continued to send out His Gospel through one forgiven sinner to another, and today, He sends it to us, for this message is just as important for us as it was for Saul.

It’s true, we might not have participated in the organized persecution of Christians as Saul did. But we are every bit as dependent on God’s saving grace as Saul was.

We each come into this life with a fallen, sinful nature that looks in toward itself rather than up to the Lord. Our hearts are not humble by nature, we do not put the Lord’s will above our own. As Paul once put it, we by nature, have a mind that “is hostile to God” and “does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot.” In short, we are by nature enemies of God.

Yet, just as Christ was not content to let Saul continue on his dead-end road, our Lord did not want to see any of us lost. So, as He did for Saul, He came to us.

Christ came to each of us personally to give us the new life that He purchased for us on the cross and previewed for us in His resurrection. By water and the Word, He shined His light into our hearts.

And as Christ cared for Saul throughout the highs and lows of his mission work, Christ also continues coming to you in His Word and at His Table, comforting you with His forgiveness, strengthening you in His grace, and giving you His peace. He comes and calls you “friend.”

Though we have earned none of this, it is all ours as God’s free gift in Christ.

In Jesus Christ, we have a merciful Lord who transforms His enemies into friends.

That is the kind of God we have: A God who astounds us with His amazingly gracious choices. A God who chose His most tireless opponent to carry His name before the nations. A God who entrusted the treasure of His Gospel to a man who had once tried to eradicate the Gospel. A God who reaches out to people like Saul, and like you and me, who have lived as His enemies, and He chooses us to be His trusted friends.

For all this, may we praise the Name of Jesus Christ forevermore. Amen.