

“Lord God, you have appointed me as a Bishop and Pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument – but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.”

“Sir, we would see Jesus.”

Acts 9

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. ³As he went on his way and was approaching Damascus, 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. ⁶But get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you need to do.” ⁷The men traveling with him stood there speechless. They heard the voice but did not see anyone. ⁸They 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. ⁹For three days he could not see, and he did not eat or drink.



Their prayer rippled out farther than they could imagine. A couple of teenagers had taken a swim near Jacksonville, Florida, last month, and discovered they were stuck in the water. The current had swept them too far, and it confounded every effort to swim back. All strength lost, they were ready to give up. Tyler grabbed Heather’s hands and they prayed for the strength to swim. Instead, God answered louder, with a rescue boat. Do you know the name of the boat? The two teenagers wept when they learned its name. They were rescued by a boat by the name of *Amen*. The captain of the boat was unassuming. He did not know the *Amen* was the answer to their prayers until a coincidental sighting.

The book of Acts has a pivotal point. Judea and Samaria have heard about Jesus. The good news ripples out farther, into deeper seas and farther lands. But it is an unlikely *Amen* to their prayers, a human vessel, a new individual who becomes instrumental in this shift.

This unlikely instrument of the good news was not only the greatest missionary, but also one of the worst and most vicious enemies that the church has ever had. How did it come about? How did the great persecutor of the church become a great promoter of Christianity?

As we said last week, Victor Hugo described the Notre Dame cathedral as a vast symphony of stone. We see a similar symphony in our post-Easter readings in the book of Acts, a sequel to the life of Christ, penned by Dr. Luke but inspired by the Holy Spirit. It all begins with the great stone rolled away, as music to our ears, that Jesus is risen.

Today Paul’s conversion we see that **God chooses an instrument.** We also have a clear illustration of what the conversion of every sinner really is. Humans by nature are in need of conversion. They need to become different people that they were when they were born. They need an *Amen*. Jesus even spoke of it as being born a second time.

Paul was no child of God at the time our text begins. When Luke says that he was still breathing out murderous threats, he is referring back to the last chapter and a half, when Saul approved of the death of Stephen, the first martyr. After Stephen died, we are told that “*Saul began to destroy the*

church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison” (Acts 8:3).

We need to point out that, in spite of his hatred of the Christian church, even though Saul wanted to wipe it out, he was a very ardent, enthusiastic, religious man. He was not an atheist. He had a seminary training, essentially, after studying under Gamaliel, one of the greatest Jewish rabbis of the time. Saul seemed to know how to pray and when God would save the day. Saul also was no rebel against authority. He was a serious young man who worked out a legal authorization for persecuting the Church from the high priest in Jerusalem. The case of Saul demonstrates very clearly that ardent, enthusiastic, and religious attitudes and actions do not add up to a friendly status with God.

Saul was no friend of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Despite all his good intentions, Saul was God’s enemy. God had already sent His Son Jesus into this world to save humanity from our sins, to do for human beings what we should have done for ourselves—obey the Law of God—and to die for them on the cross of Calvary. God made this death the payment for all sins.

Saul was no believer in that. He certainly heard about Jesus’ death, and He surely knew what the Christians were saying about His resurrection. But Saul did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. He had no use for a Savior who might die for Him. Instead, Saul was sure that he was such a good man on his own that God would most certainly take him to heaven.

And just as Saul didn’t know that he was an enemy of the true God, all men by nature also do not know this. Yet what was true of Saul is true of all. In the heart of human hearts, they have a terrible hatred for God. The Bible says this, that the “sinful mind is hostile to God” (Romans 8:7). In other words, “every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart” from childhood is only evil all the time (Genesis 6:5, 8:21). We are natural-born sworn enemies of God. Now strangely enough, the clearest expression of that hatred comes when people think they will please God and earn salvation by what they do.

That is why the worst enemies of Jesus, while He lived and ministered on earth, were the Pharisees. They were the good people in Jerusalem—the best, in a human point of view! For the Pharisees believed that you could get to heaven by being good, and the idea that they needed someone else to keep God’s Law for them and to die for their sins was an idea they hated.

Yet this is how God wants to save. To oppose the idea that all people are sinners and deserve hell, to oppose that Jesus came to live and love and do salvation for people, is to oppose God’s way of saving all people.

That day, Jesus became the *Amen* lifeboat Saul didn’t ask for, didn’t pray about, and didn’t even want. Jesus took someone who didn’t want to be His friend and dropped him to the ground. He put this sinner, this natural-born enemy of God, in blinding light and then three days of darkness. Jesus was there on the road, the resurrected Redeemer, who had died to atone for Saul’s sins. Jesus selected this enemy, maybe for Saul’s high status against him, to be part of His symphony of stone. Saul, who would call himself “chief of sinners,” was now in harmony with God’s Gospel. God would sound His message loud and strong from Saul. Later in the chapter, God calls the persecutor, Saul, His “chosen instrument.” Saul became a Christian.

And this conversion, the conversion of Saul, who would become better known as the apostle Paul, teaches us once more that, when an individual becomes a Christian, it is not because this is what the individual wants. It is due only to the grace of God. Saul never forgot that as long as he lived. He said once, “*By the grace of God I am what I am*” (1 Corinthians 15:10). Many times in thirteen New Testament letters (now called books of the Bible) Saul makes that point, that it was God alone who

made a Christian out of him. Saul discovered that Jesus was just what the Christian Church said He was: the One who was raised from the dead; the Light of the world; the King of kings; the eternal proof that God was satisfied in His death; the sufficient price for our sins; the God who had earned all His love and then some.

Jesus appeared to Saul. We often hear that if Jesus would just appear to us today, as He appeared to Saul, this would be the kind of proof we would accept. But we know from the Bible that isn't true. For example, when the rich man in hell asked Abraham to send the poor man to his five brothers so that they would be converted, Abraham told him that his brothers have the Bible. If they didn't listen to the Word of God—the very thoughts of God in the external Word—they wouldn't listen to someone from the dead. Think about it: The Pharisees refused to believe after seeing the miracles of Jesus. The women and apostles barely believed the resurrected Jesus in the flesh. God says through Jeremiah, "Let the one who has a dream tell his dream; let the one who has my Word speak it faithfully."

It is God's powerful Word that affected Saul. This ardent, enthusiastic, religious man wasn't less stubborn than the rest of the Pharisees. He always said that it was God's grace that made him what he was. And this is the whole testimony of the Bible!

If someone becomes a Christian, it isn't because that person wants to become a Christian, or because we want to be saved and then finally believes. The fact is that a person wants to be saved by Jesus when realizing that heaven doesn't happen because of what we do. As soon as we are convinced we need the forgiveness earned for us by Jesus, then we have become Christians.

Paul once wrote in Philippians, "*It is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose*" (2:13). The good pleasure of God is that all might believe that Jesus is their Savior (Ezekiel 18; 1 Timothy 2:3-4). When individuals want that, then the hatred and enmity and anger against God is overcome at its very roots. The unwilling has become willing. The stony heart is rolled away. The empty tomb is there, new life and a heart of flesh. The power of God's Word alone works this miracle, at any invitation to believe in Jesus Christ.

Do you believe in Jesus? Won't you believe in Jesus? This doesn't happen by our power or even by our will. This happened by a Law that crushed us, a new heart that moved us to confession, a gracious desire in us for God and Jesus, a baptism that was poured onto us, salvation that was spilled for us, and a meal that was given to us. In this way Saul became God's instrument, and instrumental to the Christian Church in many lands. But Saul never claimed more than that. He understood that He was built into the Church like a living stone, on the foundation of apostles and prophets, on the cornerstone of Christ, rising on a wall of believers whose roof is on fire with zeal for the Lord almighty, informed with the knowledge that He is risen. For where we expect a roof, there is only heaven by faith alone. *Amen.*