

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Pentecost Sunday, May 15, 2016

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 378, 370:1, 342, 374, 373:7.

Lessons: Isaiah 42:1-12, Acts 22:1-22, Matthew 15:21-28.

Sermon Text: Acts 9:1-22.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Last week we talked about the apostle Peter and the Gentile Cornelius. Not only was it most unusual for a Jew to associate with a Gentile, but many Jewish Christians didn't want, or didn't believe that non-Jews could be saved or were deserving of the Salvation of Jesus Christ, who was a Jew. Of course, our Old Testament lesson today tells us differently.

The Lord had an even bigger job getting a non-Christian Jew, Saul, to see his own needs and God's love for him in Christ Jesus. Converting Saul who later became known as Paul was a special miracle of grace, and the apostle Paul said many times that if God saved him, God could save anyone. So saving Saul was one small step in God's larger program of saving souls – Jewish and Gentile – all over the world until the end of time.

Today we look at the man who became known as the apostle Paul, who was persecuting Christians and even approved their execution. We see him being given a complete renewal of life. He, too, was a Jew, a Pharisee – a man who thought he was a great person – before the words of Jesus taught him what salvation was really all about.

He had to learn that he could not trust in his own deeds and “good” life, but must trust in Jesus to redeem him from all his sins. Today we remember

THE CONVERSION OF SAUL THE CHRISTIAN-HATER
TO PAUL THE APOSTLE OF JESUS CHRIST

1. He was the “worst of sinners” but
2. Jesus Christ turned his life around.

Acts chapters 6 and 7 tell us of a Christian named Stephen. He was one of seven chosen and called by the Twelve Apostles and given the responsibility of taking care of the food distribution among the Christians. But he did more. He witnessed boldly for Jesus Christ and willingly gave up his life for it. When he was stoned to death for his beliefs, with the approval of a Pharisee named Saul, we read in Acts 8: *“And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison,”* Acts 8:1-3 (NIV)

Saul was not satisfied to just scatter, harass, and kill believers in Jerusalem. He wanted to destroy the Christian Church everywhere. So he got credentials to capture any believers in Jesus and bring them back to Jerusalem to be imprisoned.

He planned to go the synagogues because that is where the Jewish followers of Jesus would be worshipping. They would not stop worshipping with their fellow Jews until it became clear that they – and Jesus' name – were no longer welcome there.

Saul was what we might call a “super-Jew”, a champion of Pharisaism, which is the conscientious attempt to be “right with God” through obedience to the commandments.

This life-style attempts to prove to God that “I am a really good person and God ought to reward me”. It is, of course, in direct conflict with the Christ-centered approach which teaches that “God loves me, not because I’m a good person, but because he is so wonderful to forgive me for what I am and what I do against him.” Saul had to learn this for himself before he could help others to learn it. Since Saul was actually convinced that Jesus was a false prophet, he volunteered for the privilege of persecuting the followers of Jesus as far away as Damascus, about 150 miles northeast of Jerusalem. He was hoping to arrest such “heretics” and bring them back to Jerusalem, where they stood little chance of surviving the fate of Stephen – which Saul had watched and approved of. “The Way” is a term used to identify the Christian religion, which was not the way of the unbeliever, nor the way of the Jewish religion, but the Way of Jesus.

On his trip to Damascus, a strange thing happened. ***“Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. ‘Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.’”***

Jesus stopped Saul and set him straight. Here Luke is reporting what Paul himself later told the Jerusalem mob in Acts 22 and even later he told King Agrippa in Acts 26. We usually state that Saul was converted on the highway by this confrontation with Jesus, but the text does not pinpoint the moment or hour or day when Saul’s heart was won over to Jesus as his Savior and Lord. It possibly happened gradually during the three days of his blindness and isolation after which Saul was given the Christian greeting “brother Saul,” and received his sight and was baptized. Jesus chose the time and place to confront Saul in a way that would convince Saul that the Christians were correct, while he had been in the wrong.

At about noon a great light flashed around Saul. This was a flash of light not just from the sky, but from the dwelling place of God. Saul was overwhelmed by it and fell to the ground. There was no sound of thunder so this was not just lightning.

The light of God’s glory and the voice made Saul realize that he was in the presence of the Lord God. The Lord Jesus, God’s Son, took over to guide Saul’s life. From that moment on Saul was under the orders of the Lord. He realized he had been persecuting Jesus, God’s Son.

There on the ground, disoriented and blinded, Saul knew that he was at the mercy of whoever was speaking. The voice from heaven called out his name and asked “Why are you persecuting me?”

Because of the terrifying voice of the unidentified heavenly person, Saul knew that someone in heaven was really angry with him. But who? He didn’t know at first. “Who are you, lord?” The answer was “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting!” and it left Saul “trembling and astonished,” because this meant that the Jesus he had rejected was not a false prophet at all, but was really reigning at the right hand of the Father in heaven! The awful truth now burned Saul’s heart that he had been deceived by Satan to attack God himself, and the horrifying dread possessed him that an angry God would punish him for this sin. The statement that “it is hard for you to kick against the goad”, just as an ox hurts himself if he kicks against a sharpened cattle-prod, reminded Saul that he had often heard the truth about Jesus from Christians, but had reacted angrily against the Spirit’s prodding him to submit to the truth.

What penalty would be demanded from him to make restitution for his vicious opposition to Jesus and his followers? We must say that this is not yet the response of a converted heart, for Saul still expected to appease God by his own personal deeds. Jesus’ answer was “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do” but this still left him in the dark to wonder what an upset God was planning as a suitable “pay-back.”

The first thing he had to do was to go into Damascus and wait for further instructions. What follows are the first steps of this man whose self-righteous, work-righteous pride was broken.

What the Spirit did for Saul during those three days and nights is not revealed to us. Yet it was a time for God to work on Saul’s heart. Saul could review the Scriptures he had in his memory, especially the prophecies of the Messiah and what he had heard about Jesus from his followers. He could not relax enough to eat – and perhaps slept very little – because he was totally absorbed in sifting through his guilt of disbelief, in recalling the meaning of the prophecies, and in remembering the Spirit’s prodding.

He was made to see that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and that Jesus came to save sinners.

God enlisted a mature Christian named Ananias in his teaching Saul. This is the second Ananias we have met in the Scriptures. His name means “The Lord is gracious” and it fits him better than it fit Sapphira’s husband, whom we talked about six weeks ago.

It was natural that Ananias, under threat of persecution, would have reservations about approaching Saul, already notorious for his attacks on God’s people. But Ananias’ response “Here I am, Lord” came from a heart ready and willing to serve his Savior.

Of course, Ananias did not know what God had already done to disarm Saul, so God briefly outlined his progress with Saul. ***“But the Lord said to Ananias, ‘Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.’”*** Paul later said that God had told him: ***“I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”*** Acts 26:17-18.

That evidently was enough to gain Ananias’ support as a co-worker, so he went, found Saul and gladly welcomed him into God’s family as his brother in Jesus the Messiah. He continued with assurances that this meeting had been planned in heaven by Jesus for the purpose of healing Saul’s sight, both spiritual and physical, and giving him the Holy Spirit to fill the void left by his Pharisaism and then to empower Saul for God’s service.

Then, a miracle followed, visible to Saul and to others. ***“Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.”*** Baptism was next, not to initiate faith, but to give Saul the assurance that his soul had been cleansed and to initiate him into the Christian fellowship with the saints of God.

Saul was on his way to becoming one of God’s extra-special vessels that would pour out God’s redeeming love to others. All glory to God in the highest!

“At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, ‘Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?’ Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.”

In Paul the apostle we see someone who had to be “broken”, that is, he had to realize his sinfulness and rely on Jesus Christ for salvation. The Pharisee was brought down, his proud self-righteousness shattered. Ever afterward Saul, later known as Paul, was a man who knew himself to be the worst of sinners, not a great person, not a good man. And he knew that Jesus was the Savior of sinners.

More than 100 times in his letters, Paul the apostle used the word “grace.” That word was so important in his vocabulary because of what the Lord did for him when he was Saul the Pharisee. May we find in Saul a man who submitted completely to God and with God’s help seek to follow his example. Amen.