

Series B, Conversion of St. Paul

*But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and 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. **Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."** The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul 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. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." And 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, and 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." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." But 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. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." So 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." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." And 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?" But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. Acts 9:1-22*

In the name of the Father and of the (+)Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The relationship between a husband and wife is an image of the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Church. Indeed, it is written, "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ has loved the church." A godly husband loves his wife more than he loves his own body, and he will not stand idly by while his wife suffers abuse at the hands of another man. Every injury that is caused to the bride is felt a hundredfold in the side of the bridegroom, for she is bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. A man who is known for his calm and peaceful demeanor will burn

in hot anger when his wife is threatened, and the same man will be cast into a fit of uncontrollable rage should any harm befall his beloved. There is no sacrifice that is too great for this man if it means that his wife will be safe, for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it. Truly, this man is Christ-like in his behavior. He loves his wife and would gladly give up his own life for her.

But how many husbands would willingly lay their anger aside, forgive their wife's abuser, and joyfully welcome such a beast into the family? Of course, this behavior is quite absurd. Few husbands--if any--would tolerate such atrocities. Man demands retribution for the wrongs committed against him. Man seeks to right the wrongs performed at the expense of him and his loved ones, and certainly no one would open up his home to those who hate him, to those who do not deserve such hospitality. It is a seemingly preposterous idea to claim that Christ would tolerate and befriend such miserable people.

Yet our Lord has shown time and time again that He does not operate according to the sinful nature of common man, and through Saul He demonstrated yet again that the thoughts of God are not the thoughts of man, nor are His ways man's ways. The man known as Saul performed acts of horrific brutality against the bride of Christ that is His holy Church. And since these abuses were performed against the one true love of the Bridegroom, each of these blows--from Saul's consent and participation in the stoning of Blessed Stephen to his desire to arrest the believers and destroy the church in Damascus--were felt in the side of Christ from whence His bride was taken.

If Saul had killed your children or sought to destroy your brothers and sisters, undoubtedly blindness for three days would not be a meet punishment for him. By Levitical law Saul deserved at best to be arrested a hundred times over and at worst to be put to death by

stoning. You would want what you believe to be justice, be it in the civil courts or at your own hands. You would want the repayment of the eye for the eye stricken from you. You would want that he would suffer as you have suffered.

But the Lord Jesus Christ does not seek revenge. The Lord desires mercy and not sacrifice. The Lord always has a greater plan that exceeds beyond the shallow vision of man. Though Saul ravaged the bride of Christ, indeed Jesus desired to welcome him into His fold, to make him one of His own. Though Christ could have claimed just retribution under the Law, He chose the path of freedom and forgiveness through the Gospel.

And so it is in this act of forgiveness that Jesus did, in fact, receive justice. By convicting Saul under the Law and showing him the salvation won for him through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the man named Saul was truly killed. The murderous savage who plagued the Church was put to death in Holy Baptism, and the righteous man named Paul, who became a first century champion and martyr for the truth of the Gospel, was raised to the new life of salvation. Is this not the same man who made havoc in Jerusalem for those who called upon the name of the Lord? Truly, yes, he is that man, and God is glorified through him.

The Lord dealt mercifully and graciously with Saul. His mercy was shown in not wielding the just sword of punishment against the former enemy of the church. His grace was shown in giving this pitiful man a new life which he surely did not deserve. Saul's actions warranted death, but by God's mercy he was not killed. Saul's actions warranted death, but by God's grace he received life.

And this is how the Lord deals with you as well. Though it is doubtful that any one of you has persecuted the church as Saul did, you all stand just as guilty of abusing the bride of Christ. You have not stoned the believers, but you have hated your brothers. You have not

sought to arrest and kill those who call on the name of the Lord, but you have acted in ways intended to drive others away. You have gone to whomever or whatever it is that you hold as authoritative and received the information necessary to put enmity between one brother and another. You declare yourselves to be the true model of Christianity, though your actions belie, betray, and slander your own name and reputation.

This is the way of the world, the way of sinful flesh. The devil stands among you, showing you the fruits which have been forbidden by God, and you stand there consenting to all that he speaks into your ears. He shows you the broad, spacious path that is easy to walk upon but leads to destruction and turns you away from the narrow path that is hard to follow but leads to eternal life. It is easier to hate your brother than it is to forgive him. It is easier to succumb to the earthly pleasures than it is to resist temptation. It is easier to fear, love, and trust in yourself or money or power or anything else than it is to be the true bride who submits to her head.

If the Lord were to deal with you justly, then not even blindness would be adequate punishment. You have not followed His law. You have not walked in His ways. You brood of vipers, who murdered the wise men of God and stoned the prophets that the Lord sent to you, do you really think that you are any better than Saul? But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother has already killed him in his heart; whoever looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery in his heart. You have not loved the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. You have not loved your neighbor as yourself. Saul may have consented to the action of those who killed Stephen, but those were your coats that he was holding.

Repent, fellow workers for Christ. The Lord has not dealt with you according to the righteousness of the law. The abundance of grace and mercy that He poured out on Saul has

been poured out on you as well. If Jesus only called to Himself those who led perfect lives, there would be no one here this morning. This room, these pews, and most certainly this pulpit would be covered in dust. Though deserving of death, the hand of the executioner has not fallen upon you. Though deserving of death, you now have life. You are the holy bride of Christ. You are His Church, and He has loved you only as the true husband can love his wife. Satan and his minions hurled every stone and insult that they could at you. They sought to bind your hands and feet and carry you away into eternal bondage in hell. But Jesus is the husband who has laid His life down for His holy bride. He cast Himself into the line of fire and absorbed the full brunt of the assault. The hand of the executioner fell upon Him, as each hammer blow drove the nails through His hands and feet. He endured this pain and torment, this death, and the full might of hell on your behalf. He mercifully removed your punishment and graciously took your place.

The full mercy and grace of God are found in the life and person of Jesus Christ. The Word created man and then became man to redeem the lost. He took on your flesh in His incarnation; He took on your sin in His baptism; and He died your death in His crucifixion.

And when all things were accomplished and the temple veil was rent asunder, the centurion thrust forth his spear, exposing the place from which the true bride of Christ has been drawn; for from the riven side of Jesus flowed forth the water and the blood. This is the water by which you were sanctified and cleansed so that He might present you to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that you might be holy and without blemish; and this is the blood by which you partake in the marriage feast of the Lamb and become one in flesh with God and neighbor and with the whole Christian Church in heaven and on earth.

This is the brilliant truth that blinded Saul upon the road; it is the light by which Paul now lives in heaven; and it is the glory which now belongs to you. He died your death so that you

might live His life. No matter what crimes you have committed in your lives, the debt of sin has been paid. The forgiveness of God has no limit. The corrupt world was destroyed in the flood; and baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you. You have been put to death with all sin and evil desire, and you have been raised to life by the resurrection of Jesus.

The Conversion of St. Paul stands as a critical moment in the life of the church. He who had the authority to bring earthly destruction to the Church became one numbered among the faithful. Though once a Hebrew among Hebrews, he became the Lord's apostle to the Gentiles. He preached the truth of salvation through God's grace and mercy, for he understood God's gifts better than just about anyone; and his words continue to preach and teach the Church of God, having penned half of the books of the New Testament. Now he stands--clothed in the white robe of martyrdom--eternally around the throne of the Lamb who was slain.

But it is because of St. Paul that this room, these pews, and this pulpit are not empty today. God used him to take the saving truth of the Gospel outside of the walls of Judaism and into the whole world. He who traveled to Damascus to destroy was sent throughout Asia Minor and other parts in order to build up the body of Christ. God transformed this enemy of the Church into this blessed saint.

And so also he does this for you. As Paul himself wrote, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life." You are no longer at odds with God, but rather you are members of the body of His Son. You have been welcomed into the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, for you are the very bride of Christ. Indeed, you are truly His beloved, now and forever.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

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