

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Jesus said to Ananias: "Go, for [Paul] is a chosen instrument of Mine to carry My name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15).

Today, the one holy Christian and apostolic Church rejoices to remember the conversion of St. Paul, when Christ brought him out of darkness and began to make him a witness to the Light!

Paul had been utterly convinced that it was a fraud, a dangerous fraud. Paul believed that it was his calling and his duty to halt the deception spread by those belonging to "The Way" wherever he found it. Paul was not satisfied in scattering only the Jerusalem believers. He was determined to destroy the Christian Church everywhere. So, he went to the high priest of the Sanhedrin and asked for the authority to round up Christians and bring them back bound to Jerusalem to be imprisoned, tried in a kangaroo court and executed.

Paul had already caused so much suffering for the Christians in Jerusalem and in the surrounding area. But in his zeal, it was not enough to stamp out Christianity in Jerusalem. Paul wanted to stamp out Christianity completely.

So, with zeal for upholding the honor of the God of Israel, Paul received letters of authority from the Sanhedrin to stamp out Christianity in Damascus, some 150 miles northeast of Jerusalem. And Damascus had a large Jewish population, and it was a city where persecuted Jewish believers in Jesus sought refuge.

Just when these Christians thought they were safe, Paul rides toward Damascus with the intention to "*bring them bound to Jerusalem*" (Acts 9:2). His intention is go to the synagogues in Damascus, because he would find Christians worshipping there.

Yet, as he went on his way, Paul's certainties soon crumbled. A bright light knocked him flat on his face and blinded his sight. Then, Paul heard a voice. A voice of unspeakable tenderness and mercy addressing him saying, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?*" (Acts 9:4)

Up to this moment, I have been referring to this man as Paul – and he would be known by that name throughout history. One thing to note here, Jesus did not change this man’s name. My name is Peter, but I also know that Pedro and Pierre are also my name in the Spanish and French languages. The same is true about Saul and Paul. Saul is the Hebrew equivalent to Paul in Greek or Latin. So, when this man was among Jews, he would be known as Saul, but among Gentiles, he would be known as Paul.

Now, this **“Saul, Saul”** is like when Jesus said, **“Martha, Martha”** (Luke 10:41) or **“Jerusalem, Jerusalem”** (Matthew 23:37). This expression is of loving concern, for Jesus knew Paul believed he was doing the right thing.

In loving concern, Jesus confronts Paul with his sin. The risen, glorified Jesus came to Paul in a flash of blinding light. This blinding light brought Paul to his knees. In his blindness, Paul said, **“Who are you, Lord?”** (Acts 9:5a). Now, this is not an expression of faith by Paul, but of respect. Up to this very moment, Paul was still convinced that his mission was pleasing God.

Then the One Paul dared to declare a fraud spoke to him saying, **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”** (Acts 9:5b).

Although Paul’s physical sight was gone, he began at last to see things clearly. In persecuting Christians, he was persecuting the God he had sworn to defend.

Jesus continued saying to Paul: **“Rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do”** (Acts 9:6).

The Levite guards who traveled with Paul stood speechless as they heard the voice of Jesus but saw no one.

From this moment on, Paul was under the orders of Jesus. His first order was to go into Damascus and wait for further instructions.

Paul, a Pharisee of Pharisees, was brought down. His proud self-righteousness shattered. His blindness led him toward repentance and contrition. And for three days Paul didn’t eat nor drink in his remorse.

“Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias” (Acts 9:10a). In a similar, but much lesser way, Jesus calls out to Ananias – *a man Paul was likely to arrest – a man who knew Paul’s reputation – a man who knew why Paul was coming to Damascus* – to come to Paul to lay his hands on him and give him a washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit in Holy Baptism, so that Paul would be brought out of the darkness and into God’s marvelous light. For as 1 Samuel 2:6 says: ***“the LORD kills and brings to life; He brings down to Sheol and rises up.”***

Jesus reveals to Ananias that this former persecutor of God would become God’s ***“chosen instrument”*** to carry out God’s will before the Gentiles and Jews. Paul was an expert on God’s Law, but now he has fully experienced God’s grace.

Paul had been God’s enemy, but now the triune God graciously transforms Paul into a true child of God. It was by God’s grace that Paul was reconciled to God and not only that, but Paul would become Christ’s great apostle as he would bring this gift of reconciliation to the world.

Jesus would equip Paul to be an eyewitness to the fact of His bodily resurrection. Through this divine calling, Jesus made Paul an equal among the other apostles.

Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus. Paul now believes, and now being filled with the Holy Spirit through his baptism into Christ, he would not delay in preaching the good news. Paul would preach that Jesus is from eternity God, who was active in the creation of the universe and took upon Himself human flesh as the promised Messiah, the Redeemer of the world.

What happened to Paul when he was blinded and later regained his sight through the washing and rebirth of Holy Baptism was a conversion. And conversion means turning.

In this encounter with the risen Lord Jesus, Paul’s life would begin to turn around. Instead of opposing and fighting Christians, the formerly persecuting and hate-filled man would become the Lord’s ***“chosen instrument”*** to bring to all people the joy and light of Christian hope – from a man who would be considered least likely to serve His plan of salvation. ***“Jesus is Lord”*** would become Paul’s constant message. ***“Christ crucified, risen, and returning in glory”*** would become Paul’s constant theme. Who could have ever imagined a persecutor of Christianity becoming a defender of Christianity? Only the God of grace!

Now, you may not have ever participated in the organized persecution of Christians as Paul did, but we are every bit as dependent on God's saving grace as Paul was.

You and I came into this life with a fallen, sinful nature that has a way of always turning toward the self, rather than to the Lord. We, by nature, have a mind that is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law and will never submit to God's law. We are, by nature, enemies of God.

Yet, just as Jesus was not content to let Paul continue on his road to hell, Jesus does not want to see any of us lost. So, like Paul, Jesus has come to us.

Just as He did for Paul, Jesus came to you personally to give you the new life that He purchased for you on the cross and through His bodily resurrection. By water and the Word, Jesus shined His light into our dark hearts. And having paid our ransom on the cross, He comes to us personally as He unshackles our bondage to sin and death.

Just as Jesus cared for Paul, He also cares for you as He continues to come to us in His Word and at His Table as He comforts us with His forgiveness, which strengthens us in His grace as He gives us peace.

Like Paul, we did not have earn salvation through our merit, since salvation is the free gift of God's grace through faith in Christ Jesus alone.

From persecutor of the faith to defender of the faith, Paul would never cease to marvel at this grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in welcoming even a servant such as he. If this "*chief of sinners*" can be the Lord's, so can any sinner. If Jesus can turn around someone like Paul, then who is there beyond the hope of repentance? There is not one! Through the work of the Holy Spirit, there is always hope for the unrepentant sinner to come to repentance and faith. For that, all glory to the Savior's grace, all glory to the triune God alone, who turns and captures hearts to do His bidding! Amen.

*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +