

A Chosen Instrument

Acts 9:1–19a

September 9, 2001

“Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” At the beginning of today’s reading, Saul was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” Three days later, the Lord identified him as “a chosen instrument” and Ananias called him “Brother.” How could this happen? Behold the mighty works of God!

This turn-around was not something Paul wanted. This was not something Paul was looking for. This was not something he sought or planned for. Instead, Paul was running the other way as hard as he could. So this happened totally against his will. Thus we see the mighty work of God, and of God alone. Paul had nothing to do with it. Paul was not seeking conversion. Paul was not wanting to follow Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul was trying to destroy the church of Jesus Christ. But God turned him around. There is no other accounting for it. No human being did it, certainly no preacher, and especially not Paul. Thanks be to God alone!

If my conversion depended upon me and my efforts, I would be in even bigger trouble than I am now! Of course, if I were good enough to be capable of converting myself, I would not need to be converted. The very reason that I need divine help, that is to say, divine accomplishment, is that I am in over my head. So conversion is all about the work of God and not at all about what I can do. And if God turned Paul around, there is hope for me, and there is hope for you.

We read about many conversions in the Bible and especially in this section of The Acts of the Apostles. But the conversion of Paul may be the most spectacular of all. That is not at all to say that our conversion has to be like his conversion in its outer manifestations. In fact, I do not know of any other conversion just like his. That is not the point. The point is that this conversion is the work of God, as are all conversions, and that if God can remake Paul from a murder-breathing enemy of the church into a new man whom Ananias calls “Brother,” then there is good hope for all the rest of us.

So far as I know, none of us has arrested anyone for being Christian. So far as I know, none of us has tried to destroy the church of Jesus Christ by systematically eliminating the members of the church. But this is what Paul was doing before he got turned around. [On the other hand, I do not know how many of us have been persecuted for our faith, either. I mention this to point out the comfort which Christ extends to those who are being persecuted for their faith, as are many around the world today. When Paul asks who he is, speaking to him from heaven, the Lord answered, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” He does not say simply that he is Lord of those being persecuted, but he identifies with them, saying that in Paul’s persecution of the Christians, Paul is persecuting Jesus himself. Christ shares the suffering of his followers. Christ does not neglect, ignore, or abandon his followers. Instead, he shares their suffering as his very own.]

Paul, who had been strong and mighty, was struck down, made weak and defenseless. The one who had been self-confident and self-righteous was made to question his entire existence and to realize the horrible error of his ways. Whereas once he had seen everything oh so clearly, then he was struck blind. The one who had set his own course in the world then had to

be led about by the hand. The heavens opened above him. The ground of reality shifted below his feet. And by the prior, inner, hidden work of the Holy Spirit, his heart of stone was replaced with a heart of flesh, so that he was open to the call and leading of the Lord. He was a new and different man. Thanks be to God!

And the Lord was content to let Paul study and pray about this for three days, in the dark, without food or drink. And at the end of that time, the Lord brought to him not one of the apostles from Jerusalem but an otherwise unknown believer, Ananias of Damascus. For one who was used to dealing with the high priests, this was quite a come down. But Paul had become humble and teachable. He gladly received the ministry of prayer and baptism from Ananias. Again, behold the mighty works of God!

One thing we receive from this portion of the word of God is the encouragement for us not to despair. Though the Christian faith and the Christian church suffer under the attack of enemies from outside or even from within, God is yet strong and faithful to preserve the church, to preserve the proclamation of the gospel, to preserve the truth, and even to convert enemies to believers. Though the day is dark and the night is long, God yet reigns over the universe.

Another thing we receive from this portion of the word of God is good hope for our own conversions. It might appear that Paul was turned around all at once, though it is recorded even here that the Lord said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." We have good reason to believe that Paul was more and more converted to the Christian faith over the course of his life. So it is with us. While we may think of conversion as a decisive beginning to the Christian life, it is also the case that our conversions are incomplete, that we can always be turned more fully to the Lord than we have been to date. That is to say, not only do we have good hope for the church under attack, but also we have good hope for ourselves. God is still at work in our lives, eliminating that which is unworthy, creating something new and wonderful in its place.

Something else we receive from this portion of the word of God is a strong encouragement to obey God. Once God had Paul's attention, Paul became very obedient and compliant. Ananias offered a minor objection to God's call, but he quickly did as he was told. Both have become examples of appropriate obedience in the Christian life. Some might object that we do not hear the voice of Jesus today. To this we must reply that we have the written word of God in the Bible. We have sufficient instruction and direction there. Our place is to obey.

"He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." To say that Paul was "chosen" was to say that God had called him to special prominence and extraordinary service in the church. We are the beneficiaries of his ministry. On the other hand, to say that Paul was an "instrument" was to say that neither the initiative nor the accomplishment was with Paul, but instead that it was God who acted in and through him. So it is with us, even today. Are we ready to set aside our pride and ambition, or our hopeless and despair, as the case may be, seeking only to obey God, realizing that our highest calling is to be an instrument in his hand?

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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