

Acts 9:1-20
The Third Sunday of Easter
He Lives!
That We Might See His Light!

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Winchester, VA
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Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

Grace and peace to you from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Something we might have trouble understanding is why it took so much convincing for him to believe it. We can assume that he knew the Scriptures well, and the God within them who demonstrates again and again that **He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.** He knew about Adam and Eve in the Garden, how the moment they took a bite and rebelled against God, God stepped back into their lives, not to kill but to forgive. And he knew about King David—can God's forgiveness and grace get any clearer than that?—how he'd stolen a man's wife and then killed the husband to cover up his tracks and then he was content to go on living as if nothing ever happened. But instead of sending down a bolt of lightning or opening up the ground to swallow David alive, the God of incomprehensible grace sent a prophet to expose the sin—and then as soon as it's confessed He declares that it's forgiven. And, of course, he knew about Jesus and His death on the cross—the linchpin in God's gracious plan of salvation, without which there would be no forgiveness. So why did it take so much convincing for him to believe it?

Just so that there's no misunderstanding, I should clarify just whom I'm talking about, because while all of that might apply just as well to the man named Saul from our lesson this morning, I'm talking about the man

named Ananias. God Himself delivered the message that Saul is praying to Him on Straight Street—and you need to go see him, but to Ananias that sounds too far-fetched to be true: *Uh... Lord? Are you sure you got the right guy? Because the one you're talking about has been arresting and killing your people in Jerusalem, and the reason he's come up here to Syria is to do the same thing here!* Certainly, Ananias had heard about the stoning of Stephen, how Saul was the one who watched over people's coats so they could throw their stones unrestrained at the first Christian martyr. *So, Lord, you're telling me that he's at Judas's house praying to You—that he's one of us now? Are You sure you have the right guy and that this isn't a trap?*

I don't want to slight Ananias, I'm sure none of us would have responded any differently. We know the Bible too and our God who reveals Himself so clearly in it, that He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked; He doesn't give up on His enemies so easily; He rejoices when they turn to Him and live and He powerfully intervenes in their lives and hearts so that they do. We see that on page after page in our Bibles; we've seen it up close in people we know. But even with all that evidence and real-life examples, it's incredible how abstract, maybe even imaginary, the power of God's grace can sometimes seem to us. Is it that way for you, too? You know in your head how powerful God is to change hearts through His Word and that every time a person comes to faith in Jesus it's a miracle. And yet when the rubber hits the road in real life it seems to us like some people are potential candidates for Christianity and then there are others who are just too lost to ever be found. They don't believe and we assume they never will.

Saul was one of those lost causes if there ever was one. He wasn't like the anything-goes, life-is-short-so-enjoy-it, sexually immoral, drug-abuser-type who doesn't want God to ruin his fun. He was way worse off than that. Someone like that might eventually hit bottom and come to their senses about how lost they are. But Saul was the polar opposite—he considered himself a role model of morality. He was one of the best Bible students from one of the best Bible schools. He took his religion seriously and demonstrated absolutely no doubt that what he believed was true. That's exactly why he made it his mission to eradicate the world of Christianity; because he believed that they were heretics who were lifting up a condemned rabbi as God's chosen Messiah. By killing and imprisoning Christians, he was convinced that he was acting as God's instrument doing God's will, and what better purpose could a person serve than that? Even as Saul was rebelling against God, he was fully convinced that he was doing God a favor.

Which brings up something else we might have trouble understanding: Why would God want him? He's got Christian blood on his hands. He's marching up to Damascus to wipe out some more. And no doubt there were Christians in Damascus who were on their knees praying that God would do something about it. Please stop him! Whatever it takes! Even if You have to send Jesus Himself! And that's exactly what God does, even though after the blinding sunburst from heaven the story takes a turn they would have never expected: The light is blinding but the words—they're gentle and personal. Like the way a parent confronts their child who has let them down, but they're not yelling in anger, they're persuading with love: **Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?** Do you sense how personal this is for Jesus? By persecuting Christians, Saul was persecuting Christ Himself—how can you get any worse than that? But Jesus wasn't just jealous and personal about His church; He was personal with Saul too. He calls him by name and talks just to him: **Saul, Saul... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.** He tells him who He is—and then He shows him who He is. Not with lightning bolts from the sky, nor crowds of Christians cresting the hill to stone him back for what he did to Stephen and the others. Everything about this is simultaneously spectacular and gentle. Even the temporary blindness is a gift to eliminate distraction so that he could think about what happened. Ironically, Paul's blindness helped him to see.

But why would God want him? And not just want him to believe in Jesus and be forgiven, but want him to speak for Jesus and be His **chosen instrument to carry [His] name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel?** Surely there were better-suited candidates out there, weren't there?! Or maybe, God knew exactly what he was doing. Could it be that Saul, the persecutor—whom we know better as Paul the apostle—was someone who wouldn't just proclaim God's grace through his sermons and his letters, but who through his very existence, would his entire life be a testimony of God's grace. Every time he

preached, people saw a living, breathing example of just how big Jesus' forgiveness is and how earnestly He desires even completely lost causes to believe that and how far out of His way He was willing to go so that they do believe it. Saul, God's **chosen instrument**, wasn't just a preacher of God's grace; he was proof that it was real.

And maybe God's purpose went beyond even that. Maybe His plan was not just that people could look at Paul and see a living example of the power of God's grace, but that when Paul travelled the world in the name of Jesus and was met with opposition and suffering at every turn, he might still trust in the power of God's grace. Look what happens over the next few decades: He stands in Athens and faces a crowd of idol-worshippers. He stands in Corinth and faces a crowd of skeptics. He stands in Lystra and they nearly stone him to death. He stands and he preaches as God's chosen instrument in so many places and his work so often must have seemed like a fool's errand, like herding kittens or talking to a brick wall, like everyone he comes across is just another lost cause. They don't believe and they never will. But then Paul thinks back to that day on the road to Damascus when he heard Jesus' gentle voice and went blind so he could see, and the power of God's grace and the depth of His love isn't at all abstract. And he keeps on preaching, trusting that through it, God not only could but would do for others what He had already done and kept on doing for Paul.

There's no doubt about it, what happened to Paul that day on the road to Damascus was incredible. But what does it have to do with you? When it comes to being God's chosen instrument—Jesus hasn't called you to be an apostle and world missionary like Paul, has He? He didn't appear to you in a blinding light as you were walking down the road one day, did He? But what has He done? He did come to you with a light. He came to you with the light of His Word through servants who, like Ananias, were called to tell you about your Savior and wash your sins away with the cleansing water of Baptism. Go hasn't called you to be His apostle to the Gentile nations, but He has chosen you to be the voice of Jesus right where He's placed you. And when it comes to being God's chosen instrument, maybe you see the people around you as lost causes, their hearts are too hard, they don't believe and they never will. So you keep quiet, because you're scared. Or maybe it's more than that, maybe it's who you are that stops you: you've sinned too much, you've stayed silent too long, your Christian honor is gone, *Who am I to talk for Jesus?* So you keep quiet, because you're scared. But when we come to those kind of conclusions, we're looking at it all wrong, aren't we? Because the place to start isn't how unlikely they are to believe in Jesus or how unworthy we are to speak for Jesus. The place to start is Jesus.

His gentle voice that called you by name when you were a lost cause. His gentle words that have always been true every time they've entered your ears, *I died for you. I have forgiven you. You are mine and I hold you dear.* Simultaneously gentle and powerful, isn't it? But the thing about it is that you didn't hear it straight from Jesus. You heard it from someone not so different from Saul. And then God went to work in your heart. And here you are, another one of God's chosen instruments, a living example of the power of God's grace, with a mouth to speak and surrounded by people who can hear—and who desperately need to hear. What better purpose could a person serve than that?

Alleluia! Amen!