

## **“God’s Chosen Instrument”**

**Acts 9:1-22**

**Third Sunday of Easter + April 28, 2022**

**Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,**

**Put yourself in the place of Ananias. The Lord Jesus told him to get up and go to a certain house and lay his hands on a certain man named Saul of Tarsus so that he might see again. Talk about putting your head into the lion’s mouth! Ananias had heard of all the vicious persecution that Saul had been doing against the followers of “the Way.” The Lord Jesus answered the complaint of Ananias by saying: “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” (vv.15-16). Then Ananias went. Today may God the Holy Spirit enlighten us as we consider what it is to be a “chosen instrument.” We will see that also you and I are chosen--(1) chosen by grace, (2) chosen to carry Christ’s name, (3) Chosen for suffering.**

**--- I ---**

**Saul of Tarsus was chosen by grace. It was God’s undeserved love--nothing more and nothing less--that moved God to choose this man to be His child. Consider the violent opposition mounted by Saul. We know that when Stephen, the first martyr for Christ, was stoned to death by an angry mob, Saul was there approving of his execution and guarding the garments of those who threw the stones. “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” (vv.1-2). What kind of monster is this? He was so filled with hatred against the Lord Jesus and His disciples that threats and murders were the very breath of his being. What kind of man would see arrest both men and women because of their religious beliefs? Can you imagine fathers and mothers being arrested and torn away from their children, never to be seen again, just for the “crime” of believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. Later he summed up his bitter hatred of Jesus by saying: “I persecuted this Way to the death” (Acts 22:4) and “I myself was**

convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities” (Acts 26:9-11). Who knows what kind of torture and cruelty he used just to try to get disciples of Jesus to blaspheme the name of Jesus. Yet, this was the one whom the Lord chose by grace to be His instrument.

Brothers, we are in the same boat with Saul. Consider that our sinful minds are “hostile” to God. The sinful mind “does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot” (Romans 8:7). In the Fifth Petition of the *Small Catechism* it says “We daily sin much and indeed deserve nothing but punishment.” Notice, it does not say, “We lay people” daily sin much, but every Christian, including pastors and teachers. This is who we are: we are sinners. We must, like the tax collector, stand back and say, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” When we lead God’s people in worship and face the altar, we are, essentially, the chief of sinners. We are not fit to come into the chancel in our own clothes; we need to be covered with a white robe before we dare enter. We are clothed with the robe of Christ’s righteousness before we are fit to enter into the service of God’s house.

My father was a faithful pastor for 44 years. I don’t think I have ever known a more Godly man. (I wear his stoles here at St. Luke’s.) And yet, when he was getting ready to die, his only request for his funeral was that the pastor preach on his confirmation verse, which was 1 Timothy 1:15 “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.” Dad specifically instructed his pastor, “And use the whole verse.”

Yes, Paul was in total opposition to Jesus Christ. But this was the risen Christ who appeared to Paul and chose him! This was the Christ who had fulfilled all righteousness for Paul. This was the Son of God who had made His life a perfect offering for sinners. This was the Holy One of God who made Himself a curse for us, so that in Him we might be free from the curse of the

Law. Paul later described it this way: “He who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son to me” (Galatians 1:15-16). We, too, before we were born, before God saw how we would live, in spite of how God saw we would live, were chosen by grace. In his great chapter on the Resurrection Paul wrote: “I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor. 15:9-10). And to Timothy he wrote: “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

This teaches us to give all glory to God for our salvation: “For one will scarcely die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die--but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God. 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” (Romans 5:7-10). We were by nature dead in our transgressions and sins, totally unable to help ourselves, but were raised to life by God’s life-giving Spirit.

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Jesus tells Ananias that Saul will be a vessel, a jar, to carry His name to the nations and kings and before Israel. Paul takes that to heart and later tells the Corinthians: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Corinthians 4:7). Of course, the important thing about a vessel is what it carries. When you ate a bowl of cereal for breakfast, you did not eat the bowl; you ate what the bowl contained.

So we, as God’s people, are all about what we carry. Our ministry is not all about us, but about the Lord Jesus whose name we proclaim. When I was a kid, the pastors wore black gowns. The purpose was to make themselves invisible, to direct people’s attention away from themselves and to the message of Christ that they proclaimed. If Paul was a vessel used by God to carry His

**name to the nations, how much more are we mere vessels to carry the love of Christ, by word and deed, to the people of this lost world.**

We may not have been called to go before kings—maybe it is just a small neighborhood or a quiet circle of friends and neighbors, but we are sent into the world. The very day of His resurrection, Jesus sent His church into the world with the word of the forgiveness of sins in His name. He said to His disciples: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (John 20:21-23). I often marvel that God doesn’t just send Gabriel and Michael and a host of angels to do His work. Surely, they could do a better job of it than we! But they are not poor miserable sinners redeemed and forgiven by Christ. They can only stand on their tiptoes longing to look into the things of the Gospel (1 Peter 1:9).

Like Paul, we have been chosen to be vessels to bear the name of Christ to the world. To more fully describe the treasures that we have in these clay pots, Paul said: “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:5-6). We turn on the lights for people as we show them Jesus—His holy life *for them*, His death *to pay for their sins*, His resurrection *to guarantee their pardon and their own resurrection*. What we are filled with, what we pour out for people, is the living water of Jesus our Savior.

### --- III ---

And then there is suffering. The Lord told Ananias, “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:16). The shape of our life as faithful Christians is to be cruciform—in the shape of the cross. This is how it was with the prophets of old. The faithful ones were the ones who were persecuted. This is how it was with the apostles, who sealed the message of the crucified and risen Christ with their own blood as witness. This is how it was with the Lord Jesus. And He told His disciples that if it was that way for Him, how much more for them. And this is how it will be for His people who are

faithful. Later, Paul wrote to Timothy: “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Paul did suffer: “<sup>24</sup> Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. <sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; <sup>26</sup> on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; <sup>27</sup> in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. <sup>28</sup> And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:24-28).

Jesus said: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:18-20).

Exactly what shape will our sufferings be? It might be going the extra mile so as not to offend the weak. It might be giving up time for ourselves. It might mean having to suffer people saying things about us that are not true. It might be undergoing the stress of trying to deal with conflict in a God-glorifying way. It might mean taking a tongue lashing from someone who does not understand the Christian life or message. Who knows what it will mean in the future.

An old daily prayer for pastors begins with the confession of sins. Among the sins you confess are the sins of “seeking after good days and vain glory.” God, in Christ, forgives us for these sins also.

That’s the life for which we have been chosen—unworthy though we are, chosen to be His children forever, vessels of Christ’s love in this life, ready to suffer whatever He puts in our path. Amen.