

The Call of Saul  
(A Chosen Instrument of Mine)

Acts 9:1-19a

Key Verse: 9:15, "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.'"

Have you ever thought that you were an enemy of God? Have you ever thought that you were an instrument of God? We don't like those two words: enemy and instrument. When we hear the word "enemy" we think of someone who steals or kills or destroys. When we hear the word "instrument" we think of tools or puppets. We may think, "I am an instrument of no one. I am my own master. No one tells me what to do!" That might sound true. But we are all instruments for good or for evil. And we have all lived as enemies of God, and still do, from time to time, because we are sinners.

In today's Bible event, we see a man named Saul of Tarsus who was an enemy of the Lord, though he didn't think he was. He was blinded by his self-righteousness. This man became Apostle Paul, one of the greatest followers of Jesus Christ in human history. He wrote a big portion of the New Testament, the Christian Bible, in the form of letters to churches and to individuals. What do we learn from the Call of Saul? We learn that Jesus can take an enemy of God and turn him into an instrument of righteousness. We learn that God can take a man of hatred and destruction and turn him into a man of peace and blessing. We learn that the grace of Jesus is amazing. May the grace of Jesus convict us and empower us to live for the One who lived and died to make us all his children and his chosen instruments. We will study the Call of Saul in 2 parts: "Why do you persecute me" (1-9); and, "This man is a chosen instrument of mine" (10-19a).

I. "Why do you persecute me?" (1-9)

See verses 1-2. "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."

Saul was introduced already as a young man who gave approval to Stephen's death by stoning. Saul was not a silent enemy of Christians. He was an outspoken vehement hater of Christians. He was radically active in persecuting followers of Jesus of Nazareth. He wanted them out of all synagogues everywhere. He was ready to travel to distant cities to arrest and even kill Christians. In fact, he was traveling 135 miles to

Damascus, a 6-day journey, to do so. That is like going from Chicago to Madison or to Urbana-Champaign on foot or horseback.

Here, Christians are called people who belong to “the Way.” This is a description of Christians that is used at least 5 more times in Acts. The word “way” in general refers to a road or a pathway. The word sometimes refers to a bad path, like in Proverbs 14:12, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.” However, here the way is a good path that refers to the way of the Lord, the way of God, the way of salvation, the way of life, and the way of eternal life. As I noted, there is a wrong way and a right way to God. Here are two examples of how Jesus used the word “way.” Jesus once explained the two ways a person can take, one to destruction, and one to life: “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matthew 7:13-14). Jesus also declared to his disciples in John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Clearly, Saul was on the way to Damascus to destroy Christians. He was on the wrong way, the way to destruction. He needed to get on the way to salvation or else he would be destroyed.

Look at verses 3-4. “Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” This was quite unexpected. This miraculous, surprising encounter was audio-visual. Visually, he was surrounded by a blinding light. Audibly, he heard a divine voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” The men with Saul saw and heard something but it wasn’t clear to them like it was to Saul. This was a personal encounter between the Lord and Saul. The Lord called him by name: “Saul, Saul.” The Lord knows each of us by name. No one can hide their true self from God. He knows everything about us, sees all that we’ve done, and even knows everything that we have ever thought, good or bad. He is the Lord our Creator.

The most puzzling words to Saul were, “Why are you persecuting me?” Saul asked, “Who are you, Lord?” Notice his question. He knew this was the voice of the Lord, whom he had to give account to. But he wanted to know the identity of this voice, the name of the one reprimanding him. He got an answer, but not one that he was expecting or hoping for. The divine voice said to him, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

When Saul heard the words, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,” he must’ve thought that these were the last words he would ever hear, before being destroyed. Saul

was shocked to the core to learn that he was completely wrong about Jesus of Nazareth and the movement called the Way. Now he was at the complete divine will and mercy of Jesus. He was blinded for 3 days and had to be led by the hand into Damascus. He was blind for 3 days neither ate nor drank. Clearly, Saul was reflecting on his entire life and all that he had lived for up to this point. He was praying, wondering who he was and what would happen to him from now.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” He didn’t think he was persecuting the Lord. He thought he was persecuting blasphemers who had God all wrong. He thought he was serving God by arresting, persecuting and even killing Christians. He thought he was sincerely serving God, but he was sincerely wrong. Saul writes of this former way of life in Galatians 1:13-14, “For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.” Saul was actually driven by selfish ambition to impress people and get recognition and status.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Jesus said that persecuting his followers is persecuting him. Christians are the body of Christ. It is not a shame or embarrassment to be insulted or hated for the sake of Jesus Christ. Jesus told his followers to rejoice and the early Christians indeed rejoiced to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus Christ. It is a joy and honor to suffer for Jesus’ name. On the other hand, it is bitter and regretful to suffer for doing evil or for being a coward or a liar. May we stand for Jesus in our own lives and neighborhoods and work places. May we say along with Apostle Paul, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Ro 1:16).

## II. “This man is a chosen instrument of mine” (10-19a)

A man named Ananias is now introduced into the story. See verse 10. “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.’” This man, Ananias is not the same one who fell dead in chapter 5. This Ananias knew the Lord, and the Lord knew him. Later in Acts he is called “a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews [in Damascus]” (Ac 22:12). Here he is called a “disciple,” and, speaking to Jesus, he refers to Christians as “your saints” and “all who call on your name.” So he is a Christian, whether secretly or overtly we don’t really know. In any case, Jesus had a mission for him in this situation.

See verses 11-12, “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.” The Lord Jesus gave him the street name— Straight, the house owner’s name—Judas, and the person’s name—Saul, that he was to bless and restore his sight. The street was fine. The house was fine. But not the man he was told to help.

Ananias replied (13-14): “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.” Ananias knew that Saul hated Christians. Ananias was a Christian. That put him in a very tough place. Would Saul arrest or kill Ananias? Was Jesus calling Ananias to be martyred like Stephen? Maybe Ananias wanted to say, “Lord, choose somebody else, please.”

No, Ananias was the right man for the job. And Jesus had some surprising word for Ananias. See verses 15-16. “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.’”

First, Jesus told Ananias, “Go.” You have no option. This is a command. I’m sending you to do this important task. Next Jesus told him he couldn’t believe if it didn’t come from the Lord himself: “He is a chosen instrument of mine...” What? A chosen instrument? What kind of instrument?

Jesus added: “...to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.” The name that Saul had so vehemently opposed, would now be the name he would carry to all people. Well, for all of us who know Saul’s other name, Apostle Paul, and what he did and said and wrote in the Bible—we can say he did quite a good job of carrying the name of Jesus Christ to the people of his generation, both Jews and Gentiles. If you haven’t read to the end of Acts yet, you will see a little of what Jesus Christ did through the life and ministry of St.Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus.

Jesus also said some ominous words about Saul to Ananias, “For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” It sounds like Jesus wants him to suffer, perhaps out of vengeance, or more mildly out of penance or punishment. But when we read Acts to the end and all the letters of St.Paul we see that Paul was not a man to shy away from suffering for Christ. He later wrote, “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” How much Paul loved Jesus and was glad to suffer for the sake of his name! Paul urged young pastor Timothy twice in the same letter: “Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony

about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God...Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 1:8; 2:3).

What happened next? Look at verses 17-19a. "So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on Saul 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."

Notice several things here. Ananias called him "Brother Saul." Ananias welcomed him into the family of Christians. Saul was no longer an enemy but a brother and friend. Ananias also confirmed the event on the road to Damascus. It was not a hallucination. Ananias retold the event that Saul experienced. It confirmed that Saul was not crazy or losing his mind. His experience was not just in his imagination. It really happened, and Ananias acknowledged it as from the Lord Jesus Christ. Also, this calling was not only about being instrument to carry the Lord's name and about suffering for Jesus. Saul would be filled with the Holy Spirit. This was a new life he was given, a new holy mission from the Lord. Now, instead of doing evil and wreaking havoc, Saul would now proclaim salvation and bring new life to people. Instead of breeding darkness and hatred, Saul would bring light and life and the love and mercy of Christ to enemies of God. After Ananias placed his hands on Saul, he regained his sight. Saul could now see, both physically and spiritually. Then he was baptized into the Christian faith as a new creation in Christ. And he ate again and was strengthened.

Can you relate to the Call of Saul? Maybe his story sounds too extreme, like a terrorist or serial-killer coming to faith in Christ. Those conversions can and do happen. Two well-known Christian authors did their best to disprove Christianity before becoming bold and articulate defenders of the Christian faith: Josh McDowell and Lee Strobel. Josh wrote "More Than A Carpenter" and Strobel wrote, "The Case for Christ." I also know two people personally who mocked Christians before they accepted Christ and have been living for Christ for many decades.

But may I suggest that you are more like Saul than you might at first realize. In our sins, we have all lives as enemies of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. We have resisted and rejected the Holy Spirit in our sins of pride, lust, greed, anger, envy, gluttony, and laziness. We have rebelliously and foolishly not listened to God and his word and his Spirit but rather to the Devil and the world and our own sinful nature in our sins of fatalism, despair and giving up and giving in to know what we know is wrong or hateful or hopeless or judgmental or self-righteous or self-centered or selfish or unjust.

Listen to Paul's indictment in Ephesians 2:1-3, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body<sup>[a]</sup> and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."

Again, listen to Paul in Romans 5:10, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son..." Brothers and sisters, the Lord has treated us as our sins deserve. Why not? Because God wants not to judge but to save us. 2 Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

The murderous and self-righteous Saul was completely changed into the humble, godly Apostle Paul. How was it possible? Only by the amazing and wonderful grace of Jesus. Paul later wrote, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

Apostle Paul became known as the Apostle of Grace. Listen to more of his testimony: "For 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, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." (1 Corinthians 15:9-10). This grace is for us also. Paul wrote, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). The grace of Jesus is so amazing and wonderful. Praise His name!

God has a great purpose for you and me to bring light into darkness, to turn trouble and distress into glory, honor and peace in the name of Jesus. God wants to turn wickedness into righteousness, judgment into mercy, vengeance into forgiveness, and wrong into right. God wants to turn his enemies into his instruments by his marvelous grace and for his glory. May we all live by the wonderful grace of Jesus Christ poured out on us as his instruments to carry his name to others. Amen.