

“The Persecutor”

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First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Acts 9: 1-20

Sometimes I get a little jealous of Saul and his job. Saul was an activist in his faith tradition and was 100% confident in his mission. He knew his Scripture, tradition and history and they all pointed to the importance of his job. Without exception, they all proclaimed that God's people needed to obey God in order to be blessed. Throughout Israel's history, when the leaders and the people submitted themselves to God and followed God's law, God blessed them as a people with peace and prosperity. The first and most important of those laws is there is only one God and you shall have no other god's before Him. Take care of that and you will be okay. On the flip side, when the people disobeyed God's laws and followed other gods or even their own inklings and desires, God brought war, drought, and enslavement upon them. The pattern repeats itself time and time again throughout the Old Testament. The people are down-trodden and hurting so they turn to God for help. They return to worshipping God alone and begin following His commandments. In return God blesses them. They break free from their captors and begin to prosper. As their lot in life improves and they thrive in peace and prosperity, they look at themselves and say, “We have done it. Look at what we have accomplished. We are amazing.” They start to rely on their own intellect and judgement as well as turn to other gods of their own creation and gods they borrow from their neighbors, which brings God's judgment upon them along with famine and invading armies. Eventually they get tired of being down-trodden, they look to God for help, and start to follow God's ways again. They destroy the rival temples and focus on serving the one true God. Then God blesses them until they get puffed up and want to be like everyone else and start worshipping themselves and other gods until the one true God has to bring them back down again.

Saul knows this history. Saul knows his Scriptures. And Saul does not want to experience any more of God's wrath and judgement. The Romans are bad enough. So Saul passionately goes after the people who are chasing after other gods. Saul is a righteous man who is saving his people from God's wrath. I sometimes get jealous of that job as well as the passion with which he pursues it. There are days I would like to stand up here and tell everyone exactly what they are doing wrong, how they are disgusting God, and that their behavior will not be tolerated because the whole people of God will suffer for it. I would love to get up here and quote chapter and verse from the Old Testament and tell you about sexuality, relationships, politics, finances and Sabbath law. When we boil all those issues down to their root, they are all about idolatry – following and even worshipping something other than the one true God.

The problem is I don't want to get stopped by Jesus and have to hear Him say, “Mike, Mike, why are you persecuting me?” I am sure that line caught Paul off guard as much or more than the blinding light. Persecuting? I am cleansing. I am purifying. I am helping. I am a servant of righteousness. I am doing God's will. I am here to stamp out this new sect within Judaism that are following the teachings of a guy named Jesus who supposedly has power over death. I will

not let God's people be polluted by this cancer in their midst that will bring more of God's wrath. But Jesus says, you are persecuting me. Though he had all that Scripture, tradition and history behind him, and he was expecting a "well done my good and faithful servant"; Saul heard "why are you persecuting me?" Saul's faithfulness to what God was doing yesterday blinded him to the new thing God was doing in Jesus. Let me repeat that, Saul's faithfulness to what God was doing yesterday blinded him to the new thing God was doing in Jesus.

Call it poetic justice if you like, but Saul comes out of his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus unable to see. His spiritual blindness became his physical blindness, and Jesus told him to go to the next town and wait for further instructions. Verses 8-9, "So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank." Continuing in verse 10, "Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Anani'as. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Anani'as... Rise and go to... a man named Saul... and lay your hands on him so that he might regain his sight.'" To which Ananias replied, and I am paraphrasing, "What are You nuts. You are God and you are supposed to know things. This guy has had more of your followers killed and thrown in jail than I can count, and he has come out here to add more to his tally. Going to him is a suicide mission." Then God basically says, "You know his past. I know his future. Don't let your prejudice from what you know about him limit what I can do with him." Let me repeat that. God says, "You know his past. I know his future. Don't let your prejudice from what you know about him limit what I can do with him."

In this passage, two men are healed of their blindness through conversion. One was so blinded by Saul's behavior that he couldn't see what God could do with such a man. Yet at God's word, with fear and trembling, he walked into an enemy's darkness and shared the healing, transforming power of Jesus. In doing so, Anani'as was converted from trusting in what he could see and hear to knowing "nothing is impossible with God". The other man was so blinded by what God had done in the past that he couldn't see the new thing God was doing in Jesus. He was converted from being a Christian persecutor named Saul to becoming the greatest Christian evangelist the world has ever seen who we know as Paul.

Church, both of these conversions are ours to own. The one defined the other. Jesus changed everything. Thanks to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross to win our forgiveness, every single person in the world is eligible to come to God. It matters not how many of the Old Testament laws they are breaking or where they have wandered. God's umbrella has expanded to cover them all. God is doing a new thing in Jesus. Saul's conversion is ours, and so is Ananias'. Because Jesus changed everything, we can no longer judge a person by what we have heard and even seen. We are converted to the fact that God can do anything – even use people we are afraid of for His glory. Too often in our history and even in our present day, we the church have lived the blindness of Saul and Ananias before their conversions. It is time to be healed of our blindness and see the forgiveness and inclusion that has come in Jesus as well as the power that comes to change people as only God can do. Our job church, is to share Jesus and then let Him do His thing.

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