

Acts 9:1-22

Other than Jesus Himself, who is your Christian hero? To whom do you really look up for their faith, joy, or love? Early in my ministry, I recall several pastors, who seemed so passionate about the Lord and the ministry. I prayed that somehow the flame of my faith would burn as brightly! Is the flame of faith in your heart burning as brightly as the faith you saw in the spiritual heroes in your life? Or in this age of doubt, confusion, and open ridicule of Jesus Christ and His Book the Bible, in this age which worships money, glamour, and power, is the fire of faith growing dim in your heart? You don't want that to happen, do you? And it won't, when you continue to hear the Gospel! Your faith is a miracle of God's grace. On the basis of our reading we will **"Praise God for His Wonderful Grace!"**

Saul, in his wicked unbelief, was breathing out murderous threats against Jesus' disciples. He dragged them from their homes and families, hauled them before the Jewish high council, and smiled approvingly when they received the death sentence for blasphemy. Would you have wanted him as your neighbor? He was heartless and cruel, bloodthirsty and mean, filled with spite and contempt for Christians. By intimidating, threatening, and torturing them, he tried to force Christ's believers to deny their Lord. No, Hitler was not the worst of sinners; nor was Stalin; nor Bin Laden. Saul wrote by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in First Timothy, "I am the worst of sinners!"

And God chose to make him a Christian, a dear child of God, a believer in Jesus. What can you say to that? We can only marvel and praise God for His grace! Saul, who should have been rotting in hell for his crimes against Jesus, became the great apostle Paul, an example of God's grace and unlimited patience for those who would believe in Jesus and by that faith receive eternal life (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

Has God's holy Law struck you down? Doesn't He demand perfect obedience, love, and worship? Don't we often love the things money can buy, our own reputation, or our own comforts more than God? Don't we remain silent rather than speak up about Christ? Don't we pursue things of this world rather than Christ's kingdom? Don't we often follow our own will rather than God's? Doesn't that boiling cauldron of guilt, anger, lust, greed, and envy within our hearts make us cry out, "I am the worst of sinners?"

Marvel, dear friend, at God's grace! Our sins may not be Saul's, but they too would rise up to condemn us before God's judgment. But now we trust that God forgives and pardons us since Jesus, God's Son was judged guilty in our place. The Savior says, "Come to me, and I will give you rest." May the fire of faith never grow cold in your heart! Rather, praise God every day that He in grace selected us sinners to be His forgiven children!

God not only pardoned a malicious sinner like Paul, He also changed him from the inside out. Paul was traveling to Damascus, the capital of Syria. He intended to persecute the Christians, who had fled there. But the glorified Lord Jesus appeared to him in a vision. **"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"** Can you imagine what was going through his mind? "I am in the

presence of the almighty God himself, and He says I'm persecuting Him! "Who are you, "Lord?" he asked bewildered. **"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."** On your knees, Saul! Every tear, every pain, every suffering and grief Saul caused for Christ's people, He was actually doing to Christ. Christians were praying to their Lord to rescue them from Saul, and God decided not to destroy or damn his #1 enemy, but to convert him. God called Saul to a living faith, that through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, his sins were forgiven. The Holy Spirit, by the Word and Sacrament, came to Saul, and washed his sins away.

Later under the Spirit's powerful inspiration, Paul wrote that Jesus died, not for the righteous, but for ungodly sinners (Romans 5:6). He wrote in Galatians, **"God set me apart from birth and called me by his grace"** (v. 15-16). Paul gratefully acknowledged, **"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us"** (Galatians 3:13). Paul had a new power energizing his soul and his life, **"I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me"** (Galatians 2:20).

Sometimes we sink into our self-pitying moods. "I wish I could have a stronger faith, but I am so weak." Well guess what! You and I are not only weak. We are helpless! And the same Lord, who graciously gave faith to Paul, gave faith to you and me. He will strengthen it by the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Don't let the fire of faith grow cold. It's not persecution keeping us from enthusiastic worship and Bible study in our culture. It's our cushy lifestyle. We've got so many choices of what to do with our time, and so much money we can spend on our leisure, Jesus' Word just doesn't seem to be that important. Therefore, decide today that come what may, you will hear the Word of God, study the Bible, and receive the Lord's Supper at every opportunity. You will daily meditate on God's Word in your personal and home devotions. Like Paul, you will triumphantly say, **"I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him for that day"** (2 Timothy 1:12).

Praise God for His wonderful grace! In grace He uses us sinners, washed in the blood of Jesus, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, in His service. Those who knew of Saul's former life were amazed that this man, who had persecuted Christians, now boldly preached Christ as the Savior of all. By God's grace and with God's power, Paul devoted the rest of his life to preaching and proclaiming the unsearchable riches of Christ. In Asia Minor, in the chief cities of Europe – Athens, Corinth, and Rome, he testified to Jew and Gentile that God's Son died to take away the world's sin and rose again to give us life! God used Paul's ministry to impact not only hundreds and thousands, but millions, billions and His inspired letters bring us still today faith, hope, peace, and comfort in Christ. With the privilege of being Christ's ambassador also came many sufferings. But the Lord in His grace gave Paul the ability to endure even death for Christ's sake!

It has well been said, "We are saved to serve." Don't you also want God in His grace to use you in His service? The harvest still is plentiful. The laborers are still few. Look to Jesus and ask Him to enable you to serve Him, to suffer for Him, to testify of Him, and to praise Him with your entire life. Can He really use humble folks like you and me? Don't forget that He uses those who know their sin and rejoice in His forgiveness, for those who are forgiven much, love much. Don't forget that His strength is made perfect in our weakness.

A proud mother once showed her church a picture of her daughter and son-in-law with the President of the United States. The son-in-law was a renowned photographer and was present at a white house lawn picnic. The candid photo the mother proudly displayed showed her daughter straightening the President's collar before the press photo shoot. Such mundane service – brought such pride and joy, because it was for the president of the United States.

Who is the One you serve? Isn't He infinitely greater than any president or king? Do others see how thankful you are to be associated with Jesus, the Lord of all? Do you thrill to serve Him? Rejoice in your new life in Christ. Praise God where you live, where you work and play, and where you worship. Don't let the fire of faith grow dim. Did you notice the three points of our outline today all begin with the letter "s"? Please say it with me. "By grace I'm *Selected*. By Grace I'm *Saved*. By grace I will *Serve*. Amen.