

Acts 9:1-19a *Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest² 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.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

Which statement would you say is more accurate: Paul willingly chose to become a Christian or Although Paul was unwilling, God brought him to faith? Many people would like to say the first is more accurate—that Paul willingly chose to become a Christian. This just isn't true. The second statement is the accurate one: although Paul was unwilling, God brought him to faith. This story of Saul or the man we know today as the Apostle Paul coming to faith is one of the more interesting stories. It is a story that reveals both God's power and his grace. It not only displays the power which brought a man to faith who was bent on destroying Christianity but also reveals to us God's grace that would want to deal with him and rescue him. It brings to us the peace and confidence to know that God uses the same power and grace in our lives and he uses the same power and grace to work through us as we carry out the work of spreading his word and expanding his kingdom which He has given us to do. Today, we are encouraged: **Go with the Grace and Power of God.**

To say that Saul was against Christianity would be an understatement. Saul wasn't content with keeping Christians quiet or kicking them out of Jerusalem. He wasn't satisfied with scattering the believers so they couldn't join together and would be someone else's problem. He was bent on destroying Christianity. His goal was to rid the world of Christians. He was intent on destroying the church everywhere. He not only persecuted Christians in Jerusalem, he was there casting his vote to execute them. He traveled all over the region in his efforts to destroy Christianity. Our text tells us he obtained a letter from the High Priest so he could go to Damascus and arrest those who believed in Jesus so that he could bring them back to Jerusalem for trial where they would likely have the same fate as the others. He wasn't ambivalent to Christianity. He wasn't neutral to it. He was dead set against it.

Notice, though I didn't say God. Saul wasn't against God. He was against Christianity. The irony is that he thought he was serving God. In his zeal to serve the almighty God, Saul carried out this persecution in the name of God. He was very zealous for God to protect his good name. He believed that what Jesus had taught about himself was blasphemous. He thought that what Jesus taught about himself was a godless perversion of God's revealed truth and of the ancient faith of Israel. He wasn't doing this against God. He was doing this for God.

What a sharp preaching of the law to Saul for Jesus to appear to him on the road to Damascus and identify himself as Jesus and ask him, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" Saul knew all about Jesus. He was the one whom the great majority of the Jews had rejected and crucified. He was the one whom the Sanhedrin had condemned to death and Saul had agreed with that verdict. He was the one whom Saul thought was dead! But here he was, speaking to him on the road to Damascus. And it wasn't like Jesus was standing before Paul like a regular person. As Jesus appeared before him we're told, "*suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.*" This Jesus was not only alive but appeared before him in his heavenly glory. This meant that the reports of his resurrection were more than rumors...they were fact. This meant that Jesus wasn't preaching blasphemy but really was the Son of God and the Messiah he had sent to rescue his people. These words struck Saul with devastating force. They drove home his heinous guilt. He hadn't been serving God. He had been opposing God! Saul was crushed by the knowledge that what he had thought was a great service to God was in fact only a persecution of God's only Son. We can hardly imagine a sterner, more crushing application of the law than was conveyed by Jesus' words, "*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting?*"

Yet, in those words was something more than just law. As sharp as the Lord's preaching of the law to Saul was, it also had in it a note of loving concern for his welfare. God in his grace was calling Saul to repentance. Even though Saul was full of zeal to destroy Christianity, God still loved him. He loved him enough to bluntly call him to repentance to see the error of his way so that he could repent of his sin and turn from it. Imagine those three days Saul spent blinded in Damascus. He was so full of grief and sorrow that he could not eat or drink. God did not allow him to sit in his grief and sorrow for too long. In his love he sent Ananias to minister to Saul and share the good news with him. What a relief to Saul's soul to hear

Ananias address him, “*Brother Saul.*” This man who had been a dangerous enemy a few days before was now a brother. What grace and power God displayed! Though undeserved, God loved Saul enough to call him to repentance and restore him in grace.

Have you ever asked yourself, “How could God love someone like me?” You may never have killed Christians or sought to persecute them as Saul did, but you know your inner thoughts and deeds. Maybe you look back to a time before you became a Christian and you think about some of the things you did or philosophies you held to that you now realize were wrong and you think to yourself, “How could God love someone like me?” Or maybe you look back to your high school and college days and to some of the activities you engaged in at that time of your life that you thought were fun and good times but look back at now in shame and embarrassment and realize how sinful those actions were and how much they went against what God wanted for you and you can only ask with head bowed, “How could God love someone like me?” Or perhaps in a moment of weakness or when you weren’t paying attention your impulses led you to do something that really hurt someone who was close to you and whom you love dearly and destroyed the trust that was built between you and you wonder, “How could God love someone like me?” No, maybe we haven’t killed Christians or sought to destroy Christianity, but we know all too well the sharpness of God’s law as it cuts us to the heart and the shame and embarrassment that comes with the knowledge and recognition of our sin. How unworthy we are to stand in God’s house! We know the punishment we deserve for the evil we have done. How could God love someone like me?

If God can reach out in his grace and power to someone like Saul, imagine what he can do for you and me. I think it is awesome that God would choose someone like Saul to be his greatest Apostle because it really demonstrates his grace and power at work in our lives. If God can love and bring to faith what Saul would later call “the chief of sinners” he can do the same for you and me. It simply highlights the simple and wonderful truth: only in Jesus Christ can the sinner find forgiveness of sins and righteousness before God. Jesus overwhelmed Saul on the road to Damascus, but not with sheer force. Instead, he overwhelmed him with his grace and the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what God offers to you every time you hear his word. Every time you hear about Jesus’ sacrifice for your sins, every time you hear about his victory over the grave, every time you hear how much God loves you the Holy Spirit uses his power to overwhelm you and draw you to Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Jesus knows you...and he loves you anyway. What an amazing God we serve who uses his grace and power to draw us to himself through the gospel and the message of his atoning death on the cross to assure you of the eternity which awaits—not because of who you are...but because of what Jesus did for you.

Here’s the amazing thing: God’s grace and power not only work in you...they work through you. God had great things in mind for Saul. Listen to God’s plan: *This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.*” God in his power was going to use Saul’s zeal for his kingdom. This man who had been the chief persecutor of the Christian Church would become its greatest Apostle. In addition to the many people who came to faith from hearing Saul...later Paul...preach directly, imagine how many have been influenced through the words he wrote down for us on the pages of Scripture. He wrote 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament. We can easily say millions if not billions of people over the years since the first century when Paul lived have come to faith through the words which God had him write. But it wasn’t Paul’s words that influenced people and it wasn’t Paul’s power that brought people to faith. It was God working through those words in the hearts of those who have heard and read them that did the work.

You have that same power in you! You might not only ask, “How could God love someone like me?” but, “How could God use someone like me?” Your conversion to faith at your baptism was no less dramatic than the scene that unfolds before us in this text with Saul. In the same way, the power which God displayed through Paul’s words is the same power that he uses when we share those same words with others. We forget that without the Holy Spirit, the message of the gospel is not only foolishness to unbelievers, it is offensive and degrading. By nature, we are all enemies of God unable to do anything to please him. It shouldn’t surprise us that many people oppose the gospel and persecute those who believe it. The gospel is offensive to those who don’t believe it. Natural humankind is dead in sin and hostile to God. We shouldn’t be surprised that it is opposed so vehemently in our world today. Yet we also shouldn’t back away from that opposition afraid our words have no power. You and I have the power to overcome this, just as Paul did. This power isn’t from ourselves, it is from the gospel of Jesus. The message of law and grace, Christ crucified for sin and risen from the grave carries the power of the almighty God to bring people to faith. When you and I go out to share the message of Christ with the people in our community, we carry with us the almighty power of God—not because of who we are but because of God’s promise to send the Holy Spirit through that word! That means when you witness for Christ and carry out the mission he has given to us as his people, your words are just as powerful as the Almighty Jesus appearing before Saul on the road. They carry the same dramatic power and have the same dramatic effect.

The power and grace which God displays to us gives us the assurance to go forward out of these doors and into our lives with bold confidence that God loves us, forgives us and will work through us to spread his kingdom. Whether we are talking about salvation or the mission which God has given to us as his people, it isn’t about you or me or even us collectively, it’s all about our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Place your trust in the grace and power of God to work in us and through us as we hear and share his word. Be about the work of Christ with full confidence and assurance. ***Go with the Grace and Power of God.*** Amen