

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 saints 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 carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before 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. (NIV84)

Theme: Lessons from Saul's Conversion

Do you have a temper? Do you easily get angry at someone or something and do or say things that you regret later? There are many that do. There are some people who are filled with hate and rage at other people just because they are different. The ultimate example of this was probably the Nazis. They hated Jews and some others so much that they tried to wipe them off the face of the planet—killing about six million Jews and about five million people of other races during the Holocaust.

Saul was also a man filled with hate for a group of people. But he was also a zealous man. He loved God and he loved his Word. He saw himself as a role model of morality. He was one of the best Bible students from one of the best Bible schools. He took his religion seriously and had no doubt that what he believed was true. The problem is, he was wrong. He didn't believe that the story of Jesus was true—that Jesus was the Promised Messiah, true God and true man, who died for our sins before rising from the dead three days later. He rejected Christ and he saw it as his duty to God to wipe out all the Christians—to get rid of everyone who followed Jesus.

This hate first arose in his heart as he held the cloaks of those who were stoning Stephen, the first Christian martyr, to death. From then on his hate only grew. It led him to go from city to city and into Christian's homes, pulling them out, binding them up, and dragging them down to Jerusalem for prosecution. And when they were on trial, he cast his vote against them so that they would be put to death. One day he decided to go to Damascus, a major city about 135 miles northeast of Jerusalem. He had a letter from the high priest in his hand. Most Christians back then were converted Jews, who often still worshiped in the synagogues until it became clear they weren't welcome. The leaders of the synagogues in Damascus would have been aware of those who followed Christ and would have been able to provide Saul with the names of all the Christians.

Saul was an enemy of Christ and those who worshiped him. That is the way we once were. We were all at one time enemies of God—we were hostile to him. We didn't know him and we didn't care to know

him, his son, or what his son had done for us. There was nothing good born in us—no part of us was inclined toward doing good or to God. We may not have been on our way to Damascus in order to arrest Christians like Saul was but we were on a different path—the way to hell. That was the end we were all heading toward, a complete and eternal destruction. But it's not like we cared, we didn't know about it—we thought everything was fine in our lives. But even if we did care and we did want to be saved, there was nothing any of us could have done about it.

So Saul, in the same state that we were all once in, was on his way to when suddenly a bright light flashed from heaven and voice said, **Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?** He had no idea what was going on; he fell to the ground and asked, **who are you? I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.**

Those words must have hit Saul like a bolt of lightning. He was convinced that Jesus wasn't the Son of God nor did he rise from the dead. It was a lie and blasphemy to even consider it. But there was no denying it any longer—Jesus was real and very much alive.

Everything that he worked so hard to stamp out was true! Instead of helping God and serving him, he was hindering God and persecuting those who believed in him.

The bright light blinded Saul and his companions led him into Damascus. During the next three days Saul had time to think about everything that happened. And it became clear to him what he had done; and yet he was still alive. God was going to keep him alive! He should have been permanently struck blind, or worse—struck down and killed. But he wasn't. Jesus didn't treat him as his sins deserved, or make him pay back the wrong that he had done. The Lord gracious kept him alive.

Out of all the people in the world to save, the Lord saved someone who hated him and persecuted his believers. His enemy he made into his friend and believer. He saved him and forgave him. He appeared to him and brought him to faith. Jesus then, is a gracious and compassionate God. And has he chose and saved his enemy, Saul; he does the same for us. He chose and saved us even though we were his enemies by nature. It is no less of a miracle that God saved us than it is that he saved Saul.

Yet, Saul isn't the only person in this story—there is another, a man by the name of Ananias. Ananias was a devout Christian, respected by all the Jews in Damascus. A few days after Saul was struck blind God appeared to Ananias in a vision. He told him to go to the house where Saul was staying. But Ananias hesitated—Saul's reputation preceded him; Ananias heard of Saul and knew that he was coming to arrest the Christians. How could Ananias go to visit Saul—what if it was a trap? And even if it wasn't a trap, why did God want him to visit an enemy, how could Ananias share the gospel with someone like Saul? How could God ever forgive someone like that?

In the 1940's there was a Missouri Synod pastor by the name of Henry Gerecke. In 1943 he volunteered as an Army Chaplain. A few years later, during the Nuremberg Trials he was asked to minister to the Nazi criminals, since he was fluent in German. That is exactly what he did, accompanying five of them to the gallows, and even giving Communion to four of them. Gerecke was criticized for his actions by some—how could you minister to those monsters? They don't deserve to hear the gospel and be saved because of all the evil they have done and the innocent lives they have slaughtered.

We too may have that same feeling about others—perhaps someone you know who lived an immoral life and mistreated others, or perhaps someone you've never met but only heard about in the news—some notorious criminal. How can we share the gospel with them? Like Ananias with Saul, like some thought about Gerecke and the Nazis, or Jonah with the people of Nineveh. They aren't worthy to hear the gospel; it would be wrong to tell them about the forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus—they should suffer for what they've done; they need to pay the eternal consequence for their actions. And so you don't share the gospel with them.

Or maybe it's not that you don't want them to hear about forgiveness or be saved—you just think it's a waste of time. That person has always hated God; he never listens to anyone. He is a hardened criminal and a hardened unbeliever. I'm not even going to spend my time telling him about Jesus, it's not going to work anyway and I have better things to do! Gerecke could have certainly thought that about those Nazis, of which at least four of them repented and were brought to faith. Ananias certainly could have thought that about Saul.

But he went anyway—at God's command. He shared the gospel with Saul; he laid his hands on him and something like scales fell from his

eyes and he could see. And what was the first thing Saul did after he could see? He was weak from not eating or drinking anything for three days, but he didn't grab something to eat first, no he was baptized! Knowing the forgiveness of sins and eternal life won for him by Jesus and how the Lord gives and strengthens faith through the waters of baptism, Paul didn't want to wait to be baptized. His sins were washed away and he was clothed in the robes of Christ's righteousness. Since his baptism connected him to Christ and his death he was assured of where he stood before God—as his own innocent child.

Saul's sins were forgiven—Saul who persecuted, arrested, and voted for the death of Christians simply because they believed in Christ, had all his sins washed away. He is now in heaven! If God forgave Saul, then he forgives all sins. If he forgave Adam and Eve after their first sin, if he forgave Moses a murder, and David who committed adultery and tried to cover it up by having her husband killed—then he certainly forgives all people, even Nazis. Even you. There is no sin too great that Christ did not take upon himself; he suffered through eternal punishment for each and every sin. There is no sin so horrible or number of sins too numerous that Christ can't forgive. All of your sins, no matter how numerous or seemingly horrible were paid for by Christ and they will never come back to you and condemn you.

And still we might hesitate to share the gospel. “Who am I,” we might say, “who am I to share God's Word with someone—to point out the sins of others and to show them the Savior from their sins, Jesus Christ?” We thank back to our past sins and know that we aren't any better than anyone else. Perhaps there are many people who know our past actions, who could easily throw them back at us. Or why would anyone want to listen what I, of all people, have to say to them? While it may be true to some extent of each and every one of us; it's just another excuse that the devil puts into our head trying to prohibit us from spreading the gospel. When we come to the conclusion that we aren't worthy enough to spread the gospel or that someone else isn't worthy enough to hear the gospel, we're looking at it all wrong. Because the place to start isn't how unlikely they are to believe in Jesus or how unworthy we are to speak for Jesus. The place to start is Jesus.

Saul is a perfect example. You know Saul the persecutor better by Paul, the Apostle. Jesus chose Saul to spread the gospel throughout the world as he told Ananias, **This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.** Saul, as Paul, would write 13 letters recorded in the New Testament—more than any other writer. He went throughout the world spreading the gospel first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. Why would God choose his enemy who persecuted his children to spread the gospel? For the same reasons he chose Moses and David—to demonstrate his love and grace in his forgiveness.

His entire life was a testimony of God's grace. Every time he entered a new city and preached people saw a living, breathing example of just how free and full Jesus' forgiveness is and how earnestly he desires even completely lost sinners to believe in him. Saul, God's chosen instrument, wasn't just a preacher of God's grace; he was proof that it was real. And you can be too!

You weren't called to be a pastor, nor a missionary to the Gentiles. And that is fine—there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. But he has chosen you to be the voice of Jesus wherever he's placed you—to whomever you meet. You are God's chosen instrument. When you see the people around you who are seemingly lost causes, be the one to shine the light of the gospel on their sin-darkened hearts.

Point them to Jesus, who died, rose, and now lives to give them the ultimate victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil. Not to brag not to boast, but as a living, breathing example of God's love and mercy in his forgiveness. It that same love and mercy that turns even hardened sinners, full of hate, into children of God—forgiven, redeemed and full of love of others. Amen.