

The Conversion of Saul

Acts 9:1-20, July 4, 2010

Trinity Sunday V

Beloved of the Lord.....As you well know, the United States of America is probably the most free country in all the world. To some extent we daily enjoy the freedoms of speech and religion guaranteed to us in the Constitution. While through the years there have been many men who have given their lives in defense of this freedom, there is only One Man who by His holy blood has given us the freedom of the Gospel. And as we see in our lesson today, wherever the Gospel of Jesus Christ is preached and taught and believed in the heart, there is where the devil makes war. Speaking of those who make war against Christ Jesus said, "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword." Which weapon dear Christian is stronger.....the sword of steel used to persecute the Christian, or the sword of the Spirit which conquers the heart? The answer is given in our lesson today, when Saul the persecutor is not only conquered by the Word, but converted through the Gospel Word. Unbelieving Saul becomes believing Paul. Thus let us not be discouraged when this world persecutes us, but diligently use this Sword of the Spirit which has the power to conquer the heart that it might be won for Christ who died for all. "Thanks *be* to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

I. The persecution we endure. Before his conversion, Saul was an angry and bitter man, "yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord." Though no Christian had done him any wrong, he was filled with the devil's hatred for them. Enemies of Christ still breathe out threatening against God's children today, even when we have done them no wrong. Sometimes it is through government, sometimes personal threats, or mockery. Their god compels them to such, for he is the devil, the god of all the unbelieving children of this world. This "prince of darkness" keeps all his children in the bondage and darkness of sin. They don't know it, but unbelievers are slaves in the devil's kingdom, for the devil has the power of sin over them, and they could not free themselves if they tried. How thankful we can then be that Jesus came to us in the Gospel and set us free. Far more than the soldiers who died protecting the freedoms of this country, Jesus gave His blood to set us free from the bondage of sin. Those whose confess their sins to Jesus and put their trust in His merits are in no way slaves to sin anymore. To be forgiven through Christ, is to be free from sin, death, and the power of the devil, "not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood, and with His innocent sufferings and death, that I may be His own, live under

Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness."

In this world of sin, the free can expect nothing less than persecution, by those yet in the bondage. Though we by God's grace enjoy certain freedoms from our state, we will never be free from the devil's persecution, until we enter the Kingdom of Glory above. Perhaps the saddest thing of all is, "a man's foes shall be they of his own household." Jesus said, "I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law." It hurt us greatly when we have family which despises the truth and do not believe in Jesus. Moreover, the more we speak God's Word to them, it seems the more they resent us and say evil things. Jesus said, "Blessed are ye, when *men* shall revile you, and persecute *you*, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great *is* your reward in heaven." While it is easy to be discouraged when we speak God's Word to those who do not love Christ, let us remember Christ loved them and gave Himself for them. For 6000 years God has been working through the Word to rescue and save such from the devil's bondage, and we are living proof of this today. Let us continue to pray for them, speak the Word to them, and endure all things for the Lord's sake.

II. Happiness and sadness in the midst of our persecution. While there is always a certain amount of sadness when we endure persecution, by faith there is happiness as well. But our happiness is only to be found in Jesus. When you think of Jesus dear Christian, do you picture Him as happy or sad? Usually when we think of Jesus we do not picture Him so much as a happy person, but we should. Jesus was the happiest person this world ever knew. What made Jesus happy? Jesus' words in Luke 12 give us a hint. Jesus said, "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!" This means that though Jesus was to be baptized with fire, namely for our sake Jesus would suffer a martyr's death, He was very eager to do it. His infinite heart would find infinite happiness knowing by His blood, all sinners are now justified and the doors to heaven are open for all. What made Jesus happy? Saving you from your sins! The very thought made Jesus smile in His heart. Jesus' heart found peace and rest in the joy of your salvation. Your happiness dear Christian, true happiness, will always be found in Him. When we do God's will, when we keep His commandments, we can be happy doing what Jesus wants us to do. It matters not then if the world mocks us or says otherwise. We know the Truth which has set us free.

III. The conversion of Saul. Speaking now directly to that conversion of Saul, how was he converted? Many

would say that Saul was converted on the way to Damascus when Jesus spoke directly to him from heaven, but that is not so. Saul said, "Who art thou Lord?" Even when the Lord revealed Himself as Jesus, whom Saul persecuted, Saul did not yet love, believe, and trust in Jesus as his Savior. Verse six says, "and he trembling and astonished said, 'Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?'" The faith that Saul had at that moment was nothing more than that of the devils who also believe but tremble before God. In one way God's revelation of all His divine power converts everyone in the sense that who could deny He is THE Almighty God? But this knowledge of God is not what we call conversion. It is not saving faith. Conversion occurs when the heart which is terrified in the knowledge of sin and God's wrath, turns to Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. Rev. McLaughlin writes very nicely, "Conversion, the creation of faith in the grace of God, takes place in that moment in which the Holy Ghost, after rousing the terrors of conscience, kindles a spark of faith in the heart of the sinner, or awakens a desire for the grace of God in Christ." While it might take years or a whole lifetime for a sinner to wake up to God's wrath against their sin, conversion itself happens in a single moment when the broken sinner turns to the mercies of Christ, His free remission of sins earned by His blood.

When was Saul converted? After God smote him with blindness he was in Damascus for three days without sight, neither did he eat or drink. By way of a vision, the Lord sent His servant Ananias to the house where Saul stayed. "Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightiest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost." In Acts 22 we are given more detail. Ananias says, "And now why tarriest thou? Arise and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." This is when Saul was converted. Like any other man, woman, or child for that matter, it was God who through the Means of Grace converted Saul. His sins were washed away by the Word in baptism. Baptism is a visible sign of an invisible covenant. I Peter 3 says, "Baptism doeth also now save us."

Just imagine the great weight that was lifted from Saul's shoulders, when all his sins of persecution were forgiven! All his hatred was forgiven, his wrath, his anger, and the peace of God entered into his heart, a peace Saul had never known. Jesus has by His blood forgiven us also, of these same sins. Our senseless arguments with our spouse, our anger against our neighbor, even that grudge we bear on and off again. These sins are all shameful, but through Jesus they are forgiven. This is why "We should fear and love God that we may not hurt nor harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need."

When we speak then of sin and forgiveness, there is always the need for daily repentance which is like a CONTINUOUS CONVERSION. Continuous conversion is when Christians daily fall into sin, and daily repent of sin, turning to Christ for forgiveness. As the hour hand of a clock first goes down and then comes up, so our old Adam daily commits sin, but our new man daily repents and turns to Christ. That is why sinners need the Means of Grace as long as we live. For the very strength we need to continually fight this battle against our flesh, is only to be found in God's Word and Sacraments. Our confessions state "God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through His spoken Word and the Sacraments" S.A., Art. VIII, 10, We ought not just pray "Lord make me a stronger and better and more fruitful Christian" and then wait for this strength to appear spontaneously out of the air, RATHER to strengthen us God directs us to His Gospel promises in our Bible, his body and blood in Communion, and also our baptism. We should remember our baptism daily. Baptism is not a dead sacrament, like a disposable camera which we use once and then throw away, but it is a living Sacrament, which constantly strengthens broken sinners with the washing away of all our sins. This is why Luther wrote: Baptism works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare. As to the continual strength we are to receive from our baptism Luther writes, Baptism "signifies that the Old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned, and die with all sins and evil lusts, and again, a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever." "We are buried with Christ by baptism into death, that like as He was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." Hence, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

FINALLY dear Christian, let us daily by faith rise again and again by the power of His Gospel Word. Take endless comfort from your own baptism and the forgiveness God gave you therein. For your heart would not look to Christ for the forgiveness of sins, unless you already knew that in Christ there is forgiveness of sins. Whenever you commune rejoice that here God gives you strength to obtain a holier life. God will surely by these Means of Grace, keep and preserve you in the true faith unto life everlasting. Amen.