

The Persecuting and Persecuted Saul

Acts 9:1-28, Trinity Sunday XI

August 27, 2006

Beloved of the Lord.....I want to introduce you this morning to a man named Saul. Saul is opposed to the Triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Instead of repenting of his sins, Saul blames God for all of the world's problems. Saul does not understand that all the evil in this world is the fruit of man's own sin. And so Saul defies God in his day to day life. Saul says that if God is real, then why does he allow terrible things to happen like war, terrorism, famine or disease? Saul thinks to himself and says to others "What good has God ever done for me?" Saul is an unbeliever who works to seduce believers away from God. Saul doesn't want anyone to believe in Jesus Christ and His forgiveness. Saul persecutes those he knows to be Christians.

Beloved of the Lord, this world around us, this world that we live in, is Saul. Saul represents all those in this world who do not confess the name of Christ. And though this Saul hates Christ, and therefore hates those who follow Christ, we are to love the Saul's of this world. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Not only did Jesus preach and teach this, but He practiced what He preached. This Perfect Man of which we spoke last week, Jesus Christ, died for all the ungodly Sauls of this world. The Bible says, "In due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him." That Perfect Man paid for all of Saul's sins. Moreover when Jesus suffered and died, He did not die for good and righteous people, but He died for the ungodly. While throughout history there has always been a man or two willing to sacrifice his life for a friend, never in the course of history has there ever been a man who was willing to sacrifice his own life for an enemy.....no man, that is with the exception of Christ Jesus. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. While we were yet His enemies, He was crucified for our sakes. In this way His love toward you was commended, or proven beyond all doubt! You are now justified through His blood!

But if you believe in Him, there will be a price. The world will hate you. Jesus said, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you."

I. The Persecuting Saul is converted. We see the hatred of the world against Christ when we see Saul of our lesson today. Saul was traveling to Damascus in order to persecute

Christians. He hated Christ so much that he breathed out "threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord." Saul was a murderer of Christians. His mouth was "full of cursing and bitterness" [his feet were] "swift to shed blood."

But God had different plans for Saul. As Saul traveled to Damascus, God Almighty spoke from heaven saying, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?.....I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: *it is* hard for thee to kick against the pricks." God then blinded Saul, taking away his eyesight! In this way God crushed Saul, punished and humbled him. Saul could no longer kick against the pricks. Those who fight against God bring ruin upon themselves.

Isn't it fair to say that Saul had this punishment coming? Isn't it fair to say that Saul got just what he deserved? Yet what would we do if we were in Saul's sandals? If God spoke harshly with us, and then blinded us, how would we react? Undoubtedly there would be a part of us that would murmur and complain against God. In our sinful heart we would say, "God, why have you done this to me? Am I all that bad, that you must blind me? Are you being fair with me God?"

In this life we often accuse God of injustice. We often murmur and complain against the Almighty God as if He doesn't know what He is doing. When bad things happen to us we say He is being unfair with us. We complain as if God has dealt us a bad hand. But the Lord has heard it all before. The Lord says, "Is not my way equal? are not your ways unequal?" God is saying, "You say that I am unfair with you? You break my laws! You transgress all my commandments! You lust after one another, you covet your neighbors wife or house, you love money and the things it buys,.....and yet you say I am being unfair with you? And then when I punish you for your evil in order that you repent and be saved, you have the nerve to tell Me I am being unfair?" Who has the right to be angry with who?

As Christians, there are two important things we must remember. First, there are consequences to sin. Whatever wrong or evil we suffer in this world, we deserve it and far worse because of our sin. But the second thing we must remember as Christians is that these chastisements from the Lord are not truly punishments for sin. Remember that Jesus Christ took all of our rightful punishment upon Himself. "He *was* wounded for our transgressions, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." All our sins are indeed forgiven through Christ. Nevertheless the Lord does chastises us, as we live on this earth. This means He at times sends us tribulation, or fatherly discipline to keep us in the faith, or strengthen our faith. But these chastisements or disciplines are a sign of His love, and not anger. God's love is always behind God's corrections. "Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth."

But it is quite another matter when God deals with unbelievers such as Saul, who continually live against the Lord. The blindness which God gave to Saul, was a true and literal punishment for sin. But this punishment had a

purpose, namely to work into Saul's heart sorrow over sin and repentance. In blindness Saul realized he had led a sinful life rather than a righteous one. Now Saul was ready for the Gospel. God sent the prophet Ananias to Saul who said, "Brother Saul, the Lord, *even* Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized." When Saul was baptized, he received not only the forgiveness of sins, but also faith from the Holy Ghost. .

II. Persecution. Now that Saul was baptized, Saul was a Christian. Whereas before Saul had persecuted Christians and done all he could to see them put to death, now the heart of Saul was turned to the Lord, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The love of God now lived and reigned in Saul's heart. Now Saul's life would be different. The Bible says, "Straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. But all that heard *him* were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem?" Imagine the shock of the Damascus' disciples! One day they were expecting Saul to capture and kill them, the next day Saul is converted and preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah! God be praise for His abundant mercy! What a time of rejoicing this was for all disciples of the Lord! The dark clouds of fear had vanished, and the grace of God shined through! "Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ."

But as soon as the Jews realize that their friend Saul, was now their enemy who followed Christ Jesus, they turned on him! "The Jews took counsel to kill him: But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him." Oh how the devil hates and despises the preaching of the Gospel! The mouth of Saul must now be stopped! And so the Jews diligently watched the gates of the city. They would pounce upon him and murder him!

When we see such persecution by the world, we should know well that the same thing might happen to us. For until the End of Time there will always be those who hate Christ and those who follow Him. This persecution comes in various ways. While it may not be an open and obvious persecution, it might be more subtle. They might deride you and ask you why you go to such a "small" church. They might say you are too "strict" or your God is not very forgiving. They might say that you are arrogant to believe that you have the truth, while others do not. If you are unmarried, they will laugh at you if you tell them it is not right to sleep around. They will mock your virginity, or even worse they might try to seduce you. The Bible says, "they think it strange that ye run not with *them* to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of *you*." Though you do good, they will call you evil! The world will use peer pressure so that you want to fit in with them. When you don't curse or

swear as they do, they will call you a "goody- two-shoes." This world will even go after your own children. They will try to undermine all you have taught your children about Jesus and the Bible. They will say science has proven the Bible to be wrong. Make no mistake, if you follow Christ, this world will persecute you and your faith. It is just as Jesus said, "Marvel not my brethren, if the world hate you." I Jn 3:13

III. Fear not! God is love! But do not fear, rather be of good courage! It is not as if God's children are without hope! The Bible says "Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come *with* vengeance, *even* God *with* a recompence; he will come and save you." Your God can move heaven and earth for you! Indeed He has moved heaven and earth for you by sending His only-begotten Son to die for you on the cross! Heaven and earth were moved when Jesus died and rose again! Therefore "Peace, be still". Do not be afraid of this world, nor the persecution of this world. Jesus says, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." Jn. 16

Certainly from our lesson we can see that God saved Saul. Whereas before Saul was an unbeliever who persecuted God's Church, after Saul's conversion he was a powerful witness of Jesus Christ! The persecutor became the persecuted! But God saved Paul again when the Jews lay in wait to kill him. The faithful disciples of the Lord, the Christians of Damascus went to the outer and high wall of the city. Secretly, by night, they placed Paul in a large basket and lowered him down to the ground by ropes, so that he safely escaped away to Jerusalem. And though Paul at first was feared also in Jerusalem, through the faithful testimony of Barnabas, he was eventually accepted and his Gospel ministry continued there and spread throughout the Roman world of his day.

So when this world persecutes us and treats us poorly for being Christians, we should think of how they treated God's own Son. Yet God's own Son did not give up the fight when the going got tough, but he persevered in His mission to save mankind from sin. One of those men which He saved was Saul, and you are another that He has saved. The Bible says, "We have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him." Saul came to know the love that God had for him. Though Saul long ago died at the hands of those who persecuted Christ, even now Saul is with this same Jesus in heaven. God is love. And our Lord God will likewise take you who believe in Him to heaven as well, just as He did with Saul. Fear not beloved! Your God is a God of love, and He has commended His love toward you through His Son. Therefore fear not, neither be afraid. Amen.