

## Too Far Away To Come Home

Acts of the Apostles 9:1-22

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

April 14, 2013 – The Third Sunday of Easter



Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. As we consider the conversion of St. Paul from today's reading in the book of Acts, I want to first take you back in time to a courtyard a few years earlier where a band of religious zealots were hurling rocks at one of the very first Christian martyrs, St. Stephen. Stephen had been convicted of the high crime of blasphemy for preaching Christ as Messiah, and so he was sentenced to death by stoning. As the stones bounced off his body, Stephen fell to his knees and cried out with a loud voice: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Then, having spoken these words of grace, he gave up his spirit and died. Nearby stood one Saul of Tarsus – the one who undoubtedly had conducted this mock trial and pronounced Stephen's death sentence.

Now to be sure, throughout the Bible, there are many things that command our attention. However, out of all the places in Scripture that amaze, I'm most captivated by those texts dealing with the subject God's forgiveness. First and foremost are the texts which speak of the cross of our dear Lord Jesus, where the sinless Son of God bears the sin of the whole world. There His hands and feet were pierced with nails. The King of heaven, who deserves to wear a crown of honor, wore instead a crown of thorns. The crowds that hung Him there on that cross jeer and hurl insults at Him. Then finally, the Father forsakes Him, leaving Him in total loneliness to bear the sins of us all. Never has One been more unjustly accused and condemned to die than Jesus. And yet, He *forgives* those who put Him there, saying: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do."

In reading those words, we are moved to agree with St. Paul, who would later write: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out!" That Jesus would have the forgiveness of His tormentors foremost in mind at the moment of His death serves as a testimony of the richness and depth of God's love – the power of His forgiveness. The second place in Holy Scripture that deals in an amazing way with the subject of forgiveness is the martyrdom of St. Stephen. At the very moment he was being stoned to death, the love of

God and the power of His forgiveness and grace were at work in Stephen's heart. From his quivering lips came words first uttered earlier by the Author of all grace: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" In the moment of his death, Stephen testified to the power of God's forgiveness. And so those most deserving of condemnation and death are the very ones forgiven by the one condemned to die.

Finally, the third place where God's Word reveals in an amazing way the depth of God's love and the power of His forgiveness is in the account St. Paul's conversion. This account is a reminder to us all that no one is ever too far gone, or too far outside the will of God, that God's grace cannot pull him back. No person's past is too checkered to repulse God, rendering them un-savable. Indeed, if there ever was such a person, Saul of Tarsus would most certainly fit the bill. He himself even recognizes this, which is why, after his conversion he was able to write: "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am chief."

So, who was this Saul of Tarsus, this chief of sinners? As far as we know, Saul was a man of about 24 years of age when Jesus first encountered him on the road to Damascus. He was from the city of Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, a province on the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. He was a Pharisee, of the tribe of Benjamin, imminently knowledgeable in the Law of God – a man of the Law, if you will. He inherited from his father both Tarsian and Roman citizenship, a status that made him exceedingly proud, for he could claim not only to be a Jew, but also a Roman citizen. Since Rome had made so many advancements for the improvement of society – the building of roads, bridges, aqueducts and government – Saul was understandably proud to be a part of all that progress.

As a young man he attended the rabbinical school of the Pharisees under the distinguished Jewish scholar, Gamaliel. As a student, despite Gamaliel's liberal influences, Saul joined in with a fanatical fringe movement whose members saw it as their sole mission in life to put the followers of the Way – that is, Christianity – to death. And it was ultimately this association which placed Saul at the kangaroo court

where Stephen was stoned. Following Stephen's death, Saul grew in popularity. No doubt, he enjoyed the acclaim and the high position he had attained. And as a leader in this sect he had been allowed to secure letters from the high priest to round up and persecute the followers of Jesus.

And it's here – in the execution of his office – where we meet up with Saul in this morning's text, where again, it reads: "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, Saul went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." Saul was on a mission to destroy the Church of God. Some of the Christians he found were imprisoned, while others he had put to death simply because they were worshipping in the Name of Jesus – something, which sadly, isn't too hard to envision in our own day. By his own admission, he was an enemy of God's Church.

The words Jesus spoke to Saul as he traveled down the road of Damascus, remind us just how great God's love in Christ is – and how powerful His forgiveness. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Why indeed? Wouldn't you think Jesus already knew the answer to that question? Of course. He asked that question, however, to give Saul an opportunity to probe his own soul, so that he might then confess his sin and bask in Jesus' forgiveness. Saul had been persecuting Jesus because he hated Him and everything He stood for. He despised the fact that Jesus talked about – and extended – forgiveness and grace, for Saul was much more comfortable relating to God on the basis of the Law.

How amazing it is, then, that Jesus would call out to him from the blinding light which flashed all around him on the road: "Saul, Saul..." Now there are a number of places in Scripture where the repetition of one's name is used. Let's look at a few. When King David grieved the loss of his son, he called out: "Absalom, Absalom." When Jesus looked out over the holy city and lamented that she had forsaken and denied her Lord, He cried out: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!" And when Jesus entered the house of Mary and Martha, and found Martha busy and upset that Mary sat at His feet listening to His every word, He said to her: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really on-

ly one. Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken from her."

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Yes, Jesus loved Saul, this foremost of sinners. He could have left him to his own devices, ending ultimately in his destruction, yet Jesus chose to intervene in his life. He sent Ananias to bring him the Good News of God's grace, so that Saul, later known as Paul, would become a great and powerful instrument of God's mercy, carrying the Gospel of His grace in Christ Jesus to the furthest corners of the world. This former enemy of Christ would later go on to confess: "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I live in this body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." And in another Epistle, he would write: "God being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ and raised us up with Him, seating us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." Yes, Jesus loved Saul, and by the depth of His love and the power of His forgiveness Saul came to love Christ and was later able to confess: "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

Let me ask you this morning, is there someone you know who is seemingly too far away from God to be brought back? Is there someone you worry about because you think there is no hope they will ever come to faith in Christ? Or, do you sometimes wonder if you yourself have strayed too far from the fold – disobeyed too many of God's commandments, ignored His will for your life, and done only those things which seemed right in your own eyes – so much so that God could never pull you back? Well, let the story of the Conversion of St. Paul be a source of hope and comfort for you. For **no one** is outside of the reach of God's amazing grace. The endearing call of our Savior still goes out today. "Saul, Saul, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Martha, Martha." "Come unto Me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Yes, chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed His blood for me, for you, and an entire world of hardened sinners such as ourselves. And it's sinners such as we are whom God delights in saving for eternal life. In the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.