

The Conversion of St. Paul
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

GRACE AND FORGIVENESS

Acts 9:1-22; Galatians 1:11-24; Matthew 19:27-30

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Last week we celebrated the Confession of St. Peter, today we celebrate what almost seems like its twin celebration, the Conversion of St. Paul. With Peter we saw how he moved from a good confession of Christ to a rejection of Christ's suffering and death and finally back into faith and confession of Christ as the one who was crucified but now is risen. With Paul we meet an entirely different sort of figure. He was not a follower of Christ. There were, in fact, very few people, perhaps no one even, in Jerusalem who hated Christ and His people more than Paul.

Paul had, no doubt, been aware of Jesus from the beginning, having been a member of the Pharisees and according to his own accounts their star pupil. He (assuming the requirements to be an apostle, that they had to have been eyewitnesses of Christ's ministry, also applied to him) had most likely seen Christ's baptism, heard His preaching, seen Him perform miracles, perhaps even seen His crucifixion, and yet witnessed all of this from the point of view of unbelief. Paul considered Christ and His followers to be heretics worthy of death. Paul says of himself: "For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers." Paul was a zealous and pious Jew, but had like most of his teachers rejected the heart of the faith of Abraham, Abraham's trust in Christ. He, like the others, was zealous for the traditions of men and considered these to have been from God, though they were not. And St. Luke reports to us in Acts that Paul, after having had a part of the stoning of St. Stephen, the first martyr, went on to hunt down Christians in order to bring them to prison and have them put to death: "Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem,"

But just as Paul is at the height of his hatred and as the Jewish persecution of the church under his leadership is expanding, Christ intervenes. The heavenly light of God's glory, the same light that came upon the shepherds in the field at Christ's birth, the same light that shone from the glory cloud that had filled tabernacle and temple, the same light that frightened Peter, James and John on the Mount of the Transfiguration, now shines around Paul. And he, like those who encountered this aspect of Divine glory before, falls to the ground. In times past the revealing of the heavenly light of God's glory portended great things. Perhaps Paul thought God was choosing him out as He had done with the patriarchs before. And then a Voice comes from heaven calling his name: "Saul, Saul..." But then the Voice adds something that must have surprised the fallen Jew as much as the heavenly light he was seeing: "why are you persecuting Me?"



Paul, no doubt in terror, asks: "Who are You, Lord?" And then the Lord says, as if Paul had not already guessed it, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." And the reality of the murderous activities that Paul had been engaged in, of his pious and zealous rebellion against God and against His Christ, is revealed. And Luke tells us: "So he, trembling and astonished, said, 'Lord, what do You want me to do?'"

The answer to that question would direct the rest of Paul's life; for the Lord whom He had been persecuting had now chosen him to be an apostle, as the Lord said to Ananias: "he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." And so the persecutor would become the persecuted. But that which he would later

suffer for the Gospel was nothing compared to what he had just received; for Paul, though he had hated God and murdered His disciples, had received the Lord's grace and forgiveness of all his sins. He had, as it were, been blind to the grace of Christ, and so when he arises from his encounter with the risen Christ, he is blinded and must be led about by his men. But then Ananias is sent to him and preaches Christ's grace to him, and at once the blindness is removed, the scales falling from his eyes, and Paul is baptized. And in this, by the Word of the Lord, and by Baptism, Paul receives that which he had for so long despised, the forgiveness of Christ and life in Him.

How wondrous is the grace of Christ; that He would deign to save such a villainous man, one who hated Him so viciously, who worked so vigorously against the preaching of the Gospel, who did such violence to God's people! St. Paul himself preaches the meaning of this grace when he writes to St. Timothy saying: "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy... And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life."

Moreover this grace which Paul received from Christ, he received through the very church that he was persecuting. It is important to recognize that the encounter with Christ that happened on the Damascus road is only the first part of Paul's conversion. The second part happened when Paul met Ananias, a pastor of the Church, and received the sacrament of Holy Baptism. There he met Christ again, whose Word empowers those saving waters and whose presence in them cleanses, saves, and gives new life by the working of the Holy Spirit.

And so it was with us too. Yes, Paul's conversion, though an extraordinary event, is not that much different from yours and mine. According to the Scriptures, we were all born in sin and hence were naturally at enmity with God, just as Paul was. And it took the intervention of Christ to change all of that and bring us to faith. Now you were not struck down by heavenly light. You were not struck blind; and no voice miraculously sounded out of heaven. But Christ intervened nonetheless. By the power of His holy Word and by the Sacrament of Holy Baptism you received His grace unto faith. Your sins were forgiven and you were given new life in Him against whom you formerly were in rebellion. And it happened much the same way. It was done through the Church. Christ sent His pastor to you to give you these things and when you received them your spiritual blindness fell away and for the first time you could see faithfully.

Back to Paul's story: what happened next is almost as amazing as what came before! The Church that Paul had persecuted, whose brothers and sisters he had been hauled off to prison to be executed, whose martyrs he had helped create through his hatred, receives him into their fellowship. Christ had shown Paul His grace, and now those who likewise received the grace of Christ and had also previously been saved from their sin and rebellion, show him grace too. They forgive him and accept him as a fellow disciple. Luke captures this with the simple statement: "Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus." And three years later Peter and James, the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem also receive him, accepting him not just as a fellow Christian, but as a fellow apostle of the Lord. And the people, though not having met him yet, rejoice and glorify God, saying: "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy."

And here is a second lesson for us. Not only has Christ bestowed grace upon us so that we have been brought out of sin and death and into the marvelous light of His Gospel, but he has allowed us to be part of the fellowship of the saints, though we in no way deserve such acceptance and fellowship. And likewise, we now ought to be gracious to others whom He is bringing to salvation, even if they have been our enemies or have persecuted the Church in some way. When such a one is brought through baptism into the Faith, we also glorify God and rejoice. There can be no room here for grudges against fellow Christians, whether over offences petty or large. For if we have received such grace of Christ who saved us when we were His enemies, shouldn't we also show grace to others who have offended us far less than we have offended Him? And likewise with our fellow Christians. An attitude of graciousness and forgiveness to those whom Christ brings to repentance again must remain in us and be expressed toward our brothers and sisters when they repent and are restored.

And so the grace of Christ that was bestowed upon Paul is also at the center of our lives. Grace received and grace proffered in turn. And we must look forward to the times when we can say of those who join us "He who formerly persecuted us now confesses the faith he once tried to destroy!" Thanks be to Christ for His grace to St. Paul, that we may see and know how loving and gracious He is, for His grace to us that He has redeemed us from our rebellion, and also for His grace to every person who encounters Him and is changed! To Him be all glory and honor in heaven and on earth, Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠