

## Sermon 35, Christ Conquers His Enemy, Acts 9:1-31

**Proposition:** Luke has shown us that Christ reigns over outsiders and outcasts; now he shows that Christ reigns over persecutors too, and that even the most vicious hater of the church can become a brother.

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### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have seen the conversions of Samaritans and an Ethiopian; now Luke shows us the conversion of an enemy, and next he'll show us the conversion of the ultimate outsider — a pagan Gentile. So as we look this morning at the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, I want you to remember that Luke's main point is to show that Jesus Christ reigns. The biggest expression of the reign of Christ, though, is not the discrediting and replacement of the Temple leadership. Rather, the reign of Christ is most clearly manifested in the conversion of individuals who are rescued from Satan's kingdom of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of Jesus. To become a citizen of Jesus' kingdom is the same thing as becoming a church member. The church, if you remember, is the citizens' assembly of the kingdom. The kingdom is bigger than the church — but the church is definitely a key part of the kingdom. Well, in our text this morning, Luke obviously is providing the backstory of the most influential of all the apostles. Where would the church be without Romans and Galatians?

How would we understand the faith without Hebrews and Ephesians? The emphasis on this chapter is on the reign of Christ that is so powerful that it even rules over enemies. You all have heard, I trust, stories of modern-day persecutors being converted through the witness of the people they were persecuting. It can happen. But here, a year or two after His resurrection, Christ exercised His power to take an enemy and transform him into a brother, a chosen vessel who would carry His name and suffer like He did in order to build His church.

### **I. The Enemy's Plan: Threats, Murder, Binding, Extradition, vv. 1-2**

Luke has already introduced Saul to us. He was standing by at the death of Stephen, consenting to it. And now, we are given a fuller description of how Saul behaved toward the church. He wanted to arrest, bind, and extradite Christians from Damascus to Jerusalem. What did he want to do with them once they arrived in Jerusalem? Well, the text mentions “threats” and “murder.” Whether Saul was actually allowed to do with lots of Christians as he had done to Stephen, we don't know. But we know this: he wanted to kill. He was not some kind of theoretical persecutor, an armchair or merely intellectual opponent of Christianity. He was an active, engaged anti-Christian who was not squeamish about using violence.

Brothers and sisters, we're looking at the definition of an enemy. While we may have little doubt about the opinion that, say, the editor of *The Washington Post* or the chaplain of Harvard University entertains toward Christianity, we also don't expect to be arrested, extradited, and possibly personally murdered by them. Though they are doubtless enemies of the faith, they are not violent enemies. Saul of Tarsus was. Luke leaves us in no doubt of that. Yes, Saul was in cahoots with the Jerusalem establishment that we've just seen discredited. But more than that, he was a violent and implacable enemy.

Are you afraid of enemies of Christ today? Do you see persecution coming? I think many people do, and not just in the “third world” or the aggressive dictatorships of Eurasia. And if persecution is coming, if persecutors are going to get angry with Christians and breathe threats and murder against us, what will we do? We will go back to Acts 9 and remind ourselves that God reigns over enemies.

### **II. The Enemy's Encounter with Christ, vv. 3-6**

You see, Jesus came down on the Damascus Road and confronted Saul of Tarsus.

#### **A. Knocked Down by Glory, vv. 3-4**

Near Damascus, the light of the glory of Jesus Christ flashed around Paul and knocked him down. This was not impotent glory; this was potent glory, the powerful glory of the Son of God. And there was nothing Saul could do about it. In the 1970s, our American pilots stationed on the border with East Germany flew missions wearing an eyepatch, so that if the eye they were using was blinded by nuclear explosions they would still have one good eye with which to fly home. Saul was unprepared; he had no eyepatch — not that a measly black cloth would have been sufficient to exclude the radiance of the glory of the Son of God! He was blinded in both eyes, knocked down, and generally given the message that someone altogether greater than he had something to say to him about his murder and threats.

## **B. Confronted by Jesus, vv. 4-6**

So, knocked down on the Damascus Road, Saul is then confronted by Jesus with the question “Why are you persecuting me?”

That is the mercy and tenderness of our Lord. He does not simply kill the enemy right there. Instead, He asks a question to make Saul think. “Why are you persecuting me?” The implication, of course, is “Stop persecuting me.” But Christ does not lead with a command. He leads with a question. Can you worship this Messiah, who in confrontation asks Saul to examine his heart and whether his motives are acceptable?

Saul acknowledges this blindingly glorious being as Lord, but all the same asks who He is. Is this a sincere question? Well, Jesus answers it and identifies Himself once again as the one persecuted by Saul, but adds His name: Jesus. I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one who started this movement to which you’re so opposed.

Some idiot scholars today have posited a split between Jesus and Paul, to the point of saying that Paul is the real founder of Christianity and that his teaching diverges massively from the example and doctrine of Jesus. But here, we see the reality that Jesus had already established something quite different from rabbinic Judaism, something that Paul clearly saw as not fitting into the traditions of his fathers. Paul did not establish Christianity; it was already established by the time he came to believe in it.

So he learns two things in this confrontation: That he is not persecuting merely some misguided Jewish folks, but actually persecuting their Heavenly Lord; and second, that this Lord’s name is Jesus, and in fact He is the very same one who recently taught publicly for years throughout Galilee and Judea.

That would be a lot to take in. But Jesus continues to take command of the situation. He does not say “So, what do you think of that?” or “So how about it, Saul? You gonna listen to me and quit persecuting now?” Jesus says “Go into town and you’ll get your next instructions there.”

“What you must do.” There is no hint here that Saul is going to be shown something that he can take or leave. He will obey Jesus from now on.

## **C. Publicly Incapacitated, vv. 7-8**

As if to underscore the point, the vision leaves Saul publicly incapacitated. He can no longer see; he cannot get himself into Damascus or anywhere else.

Has anyone here undergone the trauma of losing your glasses? How about the trauma of suddenly being struck blind? The message of the Lord is only too clear: Saul, you are not in charge of your own fate! You can’t even get yourself to your destination. I rule you; I control you.

Do you actually believe this about God’s power in the life of the individual Christian? How about in the life of the individual persecutor? The corporate persecutor? Do you know for a fact that God can make guns misfire, fires not burn, locks open? That He can alter files? Change databases? Distract guards, or even make them friendly? Brothers and sisters, the enemy is not all-powerful. The enemy has no power at all except what’s given them from above.

Anyone who wants to murder Christians can actually be struck blind or worse at any time by the power of God.

### **III. The Enemy Becomes a Brother, vv. 9-19**

But as exciting and cool as the story would be if it ended at v. 9, there is more. The enemy does not stay an enemy. He actually becomes a brother.

#### **A. Saul Helpless, Blind and Fasting, vv. 8-9**

He gets into the city, but he's helpless, blind, and fasting. He has to be led around by the hand. So much for him being a threat!

#### **B. Ananias, Called by Christ to Receive Saul, vv. 10-15**

The story then shifts to Ananias, who is brought onto the same page with Saul (as it were) by receiving a vision that tells him about what's happened and commissions him to bring Saul into the church. Paul was later concerned to insist that he did not receive his apostolic credentials from human beings. That's true enough. But here's the thing, folks: It's not possible to be brought into the fellowship of the church without human beings! The fellowship of the church is human fellowship. Paul may have gotten his apostleship directly from Jesus (just as Peter and rest, except Matthias, got it directly from Jesus), but he had to have Ananias there to shake his hand, baptize him, and give him lunch. I'm serious! We in the church get so tangled up. We refuse to ask God to do His part; we are almost allergic to prayer, it seems to me sometimes. But then we also refuse to do our part. God is not going to shake the new believer's hand and give him lunch. That's the church's job. God is not going to reach down from Heaven and baptize the new believer. That's our job as the church.

Notice that Ananias was resistant. Even though he had been informed by God himself that Saul was helpless, blind, and praying, he's still afraid of him. And aren't we all too often afraid of new believers? They don't know the church lingo. They'll say or do the wrong thing. They will mess up our tidy church. All the more can we be afraid of former persecutors, someone who is affiliated with "them" in our us-vs.-them battles, and refuse to take action to welcome them as brothers. Don't you love how Ananias argues with the Lord and brings forward these facts about Saul's past, as if to say "C'mon, Lord, don't you know this stuff?" Brothers and sisters, when our prayers consist of reminding God why it would be dangerous for us to obey Him, what does that tell us? Maybe that we're not the most obedient? That we are not the most welcoming church?

#### **C. Saul's Commision, vv. 15-16**

Well, Jesus as usual ignores the objections. As one commentator pointed out, there are several scenes in Scripture where God calls someone to a particular task, and the person objects. Yet in no case does God withdraw His request. He might interact with the objection, but never does He say, "Yeah, you're right. I will give up on trying to get you to do this." God will never admit that He was wrong because He is never wrong!

So He commissions Saul, through Ananias. To Ananias, Christ reveals these truths about Saul and his calling.

### **1. Chosen Vessel, v. 15**

The first is that he is a chosen vessel. Christ handpicked him. Christians throughout the centuries have said to each other that it's easy to see why. Of course Jesus would want this one! Just read one of his letters. The other "doctors of the church" are not universally beloved and accessible — but pretty much every Christian loves Paul. More than anyone else, he spelled out the Christian faith in clear and rational terms.

### **2. Bearer of Christ's Name, v. 15**

But not only is he chosen; he is chosen to be a container in which Christ's name is held. Paul's letters are not about Paul. When he speaks of himself, he does so for one or two verses at a time, reluctantly. His most personal letter, 2 Corinthians, is hardly a tell-all, and certainly does not primarily consist of introspection as the mighty apostle "unlocks his heart" or "tells his story." Just as Bach's music and Shakespeare's plays are great precisely because they are not about Bach or Shakespeare, so Paul's letters are great because they are about Jesus, not Paul.

Brothers and sisters, it is completely fair to say that we too are chosen vessels to carry the name of Christ. That's why we go by the term "Christian." We are literally bearing His name. And thus, we need to push back against our psychologized age by being about Jesus, not about us! How I feel, my authentically broken journey, is legitimate in a certain sense. But it is not the main thing or the most important thing in my life or yours. I'm not a Calebite. I'm a Christian. And so are you.

### **3. Sufferer, v. 16**

Finally, Saul's calling is not described in terms of glory. Lots of commentators have indulged in the most wild and absurd speculations over the years because Luke claims to have known Paul well and yet never mentions his letters. Yet Paul's letters are by far the most important thing he ever did. Why doesn't Luke mention them? Right here would have been a really juicy place: God, at the beginning of Saul/Paul's career, could have said, "I will show him how he will write 14 magnificent letters that build my church like no other." But at least here, and maybe through the rest of Acts too, the reason the letters aren't mentioned is that Paul's primary calling is to be a sufferer. Yes, he's an apostle and the great builder of the church and all the rest of it. But as far as Christ is concerned, Paul's greatest ministry is the ministry of suffering — being beaten, stoned, ostracized, driven out, shipwrecked twice, and more.

Brothers and sisters, do you believe that part of becoming a Christian might be becoming a sufferer? Are you ready to sign up for a faith that says, right at the center of the book of Acts, that it's only through many tribulations that we'll inherit the Kingdom of God?

What's more, do you believe that suffering might actually be the most important ministry you do? That your cancer will be more spiritually profitable than your sermons? That your imprisonment, sickness, rejection will be the core of your calling, while the lessons you teach, hymns you play/sing, letters you write will be peripheral?

Luke is sometimes accused of drawing a triumphalistic portrait of Paul's ministry. This statement of Paul's calling should lay that accusation to rest right now. Paul was called by Jesus to be a Christian and to suffer. Yes, we are ready to award him the Greatest Christian of All Time

label; basically, in our minds it comes down to a tie between him and the disciple Jesus loved. But that description is, well, missing in this text, and in the entire rest of the Bible. Peter refers to him as “our beloved brother Paul.” Not “the greatest Christian ever, Paul” but “my beloved brother” — you know, exactly how he refers to you and me and ordinary Christians everywhere.

Brothers and sisters, I say this not to run down Paul; obviously none of us is even worthy to think about untying his sandals. I say it to get our minds back to what Scripture actually says, which is that Paul is about Jesus, not about Paul. The church is about Jesus, not about Paul. And thus, none of us is called to be the way, the truth, and life. We are called to get to know the way, the truth, and the life — and to suffer for Him.

Saul, you’re a Christian now. Congratulations! You get to go from being a murderer to being murdered, from beating people up to getting beaten up, from arresting people to sitting in a prison cell.

That’s what this chapter says. And it says it not just to Saul, but to you and me. If you want to be a Christian, get ready to suffer.

#### **D. Saul’s Official Welcome, vv. 17-19**

Saul is officially welcomed by Ananias with the title “Brother.” Before he was “enemy Saul.” Now he is “brother Saul.” Ananias touches him, laying hands on him and giving him the Holy Spirit. His sight comes back, and he is baptized. Now Saul is officially a member of the church.

#### **IV. The Brother Submits to Christ’s Reign, vv. 21-30**

And what does he do as soon as He’s part of the church? He begins to submit to Christ’s reign.

##### **A. He Proclaims Jesus as God’s Son, v. 20**

The first way he does so is by testifying that Jesus is the Son of God. This is the very point at issue between Jews and Christians, then and now. And to testify that Jesus is the Son of God is to clearly fly one’s flag: I’ve left Judaism. I am a Christian. Judaism teaches that Yahweh is One and understands this to mean that He is one person as well as one being. Christians, though, teach that God is one being who exists in three Persons — one of whom is the Son of God.

This is submission to Christ — first and most important, to acknowledge who He is. You are not a Christian if you don’t know who Christ is. If you think that my friend’s dog Murphy is a human being, you don’t know Murphy. If you think that Jesus of Nazareth is a mere mortal, you don’t know Jesus. If you’re submitting to Him, the first thing to do is acknowledge that He is worthy to rule.

##### **B. He Proves Jesus to be the Messiah, vv. 21-22**

And not only does Saul admit the identity of Jesus as God’s Son and therefore ruler in Zion and over all God’s enemies; he also proves that Jesus is the one God has anointed to save the world. This is very surprising to everyone who is familiar with his past career, but it is nonetheless the case. This too is part of submitting to the reign of Christ — acknowledging not only His person, as God’s Son, but also His office, Messiah.

##### **C. He Is Accepted by the Apostles, vv. 27-28**

Saul then goes to Jerusalem and is accepted by the apostles. Luke is not saying that Peter and James made Saul into an apostle, just that they recognized him as such. As his letters show, this

was bitterly contested for decades. Yet the testimony of the whole church since the late first century has uniformly been that not only is Paul an apostle, but that he is the greatest of the apostles. In short, Paul submits to Christ's reign by serving Him as one of His apostles.

**D. He Argues with Hellenists in Jerusalem, v. 29**

He continues to argue with the Jewish people and prove that Jesus is Lord.

**E. He Escapes Repeated Plots Against his Life, vv. 23, 24, 29**

And, in fulfillment of his commission, we are told three times in this section that his Jewish former cronies were trying to kill him.

**V. When an Enemy Becomes a Brother, the Church Flourishes, v. 31**

Yet they did not succeed. Instead, Luke reports that when the enemy becomes a brother, the church flourishes. That's what happened when Christ's reign conquered an enemy.

So don't be afraid of persecutors. Jesus rules even over them. Submit to His reign and embrace the suffering, because that's what God's Son did, that's what the greatest apostle did, and that's what every Christian is called to do. Amen.