

THEY ONLY WERE HEARING IT SAID, "HE WHO USED TO PERSECUTE US IS NOW PREACHING THE FAITH HE ONCE TRIED TO DESTROY." AND THEY GLORIFIED GOD BECAUSE OF ME.

"Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me" (LSB 611:1). When we think of the chief of sinners, we would think of Nero, Adolf Hitler. The hymnwriter based his beautiful hymn on the words of the man who calls himself the chief of sinners -- the Apostle St. Paul: *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, OF WHOM I AM THE FOREMOST* (1 Tm 1:15). St. Paul -- the chief of sinners! You bet, that is exactly what he calls himself.

Paul knew that in his thoughts, words, and deeds, he was a sinner. Try and try as he might, his works gave him no peace. His only joy came from Jesus' blood shed on Calvary's cross.

Today, we celebrate the Conversion of St. Paul. Paul stands before us as an example of God's mercy, that His grace does indeed abound more than sin. And, Paul stands for us as an example of the great things that God can accomplish through the life of a Christian believer.

When we first meet Paul in the Bible, his name is Saul, a persecutor of Christians. In fact, the first mention of Saul in the Bible is at the stoning of Stephen, where we are told, *And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul* (Ac 7:58).

As a result of the persecution of the Christians in the city of Jerusalem, the Christians fled that city in fear of their lives. And Saul pursues them. We read again in the book of Acts, *Saul was ravaging the*

church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison (8:3).

In our first lesson for today, we find Saul approaching the city of Damascus so *that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem (v. 2).* The risen, Ascended Lord Himself appeared to that persecutor of Christians, *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me...I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting vv. 4, 5).*

It is good for us to remember the words of 2 Corinthians 5, *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation (v. 17).* The grace of God in Christ made Saul, the persecutor of Christians, to Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. A new name for a **new creation** in Christ.

The love of Christ for sinners poured forth from Paul's heart. Paul traveled all over the known world of his day, preaching and teaching the saving Gospel of Christ.

Jesus spoke of the price that the apostles would pay because they love Him more than they loved the things of this world:

"They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for My name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness" (Lk 21:12-13).

Nothing happens by chance in God's creation. So that even kings and rulers would hear the saving Gospel, God saw to it that the apostles were arrested and brought before earthly rulers so that they could preach Christ and Him crucified before earthly monarchs. How true this was for Paul. Under arrest, Paul was brought before the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jewish religion; the Governors Felix and Festus; and King Herod, the king of the Jewish nation.

What do we learn from the life of Paul? We learn that we are all sinners. We cannot please God nor claim a place in heaven by our works, as Paul writes, *by the works of the law no one will be justified (Ga 2:16)*.

The saints stand for us as examples of God's **mercy**. In them, particularly in the life of Paul today, we see God making known to us His desire to save us poor sinners. Examining our actions, the words from our lips, and the thoughts of our hearts, which of us cannot confess with Paul: "I am the chief of sinners"!

God saved Paul and God saved us in Christ. Paul writes:

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life (1 Tm 1:15-16).

Jesus died for Paul, in his place, so that he would be forgiven. Jesus rose for Paul, so that death would have no hold on him. And Dear Child of God, Jesus died for you, in your place, so that you are forgiven. Jesus rose for you, so that death has no hold on you.

Saul the Persecutor became Paul, a **new creation** in Christ. We live in Christ and Christ lives in us, so that we can say with Paul,

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me (Ga 2:20).

The lives of the saints, and in particular St. Paul today, do something else for us as we walk by faith through this vale of tears -- they give us **encouragement** in living for Christ. When we see what Paul endured for the sake of Christ, we see that God will preserve us.

What price did Paul pay for the Gospel? He tells us:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked (2 Cor 11:23-27).

And you thought you had problems! Make no mistake about it, My Friends -- we can expect no less. The world hated Jesus and sought to silence Him with death. And we remember the words of Jesus, *"A disciple is not above His teacher, nor a servant about His master"* (Mt 10:24). The world hated Paul and sought to silence him with unspeakable acts of cruelty; finally, with death. The world hates all who love the Lord. No, My Friends, we may not be imprisoned, beaten, and killed for faith. But that does not mean that we will not be met with unkind words and given looks which tell the hatred in the heart.

Take heart and find comfort in the life and witness of Paul. With the strength Christ gives to us each day, we are to imitate Paul's faith and his witness to Christ.

Paul was called by Jesus to be an Apostle. Yet, to keep him from being conceited, God gave him a "thorn in the flesh." When Paul asked God to remove it, God answered him: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness"* (2 Co 12:9). To keep us from thinking that we can live without God, our Wise and Kind Father in heaven allows "thorns" to enter our lives. Floods, illness and accident, marriage problems, difficulties with children, all serve to remind us of the truth of

Paul's words, *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me... for when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Co 12:9, 10)*. God's grace kept Paul, as it will keep you, Dear Child of God.

We remember that Paul traveled around the known world of his day with the saving Gospel. Let that same love for the lost fill our hearts. May you use those moments at your kitchen table and your children's bedside to tell them the love Christ has for them. May each of us this week invite an unchurched neighbor, family member, friend, co-worker to worship next Sunday.

As we follow in the footsteps of Paul, let us always confess with him, *One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called my heavenward in Christ Jesus (Ph 3:13-14, NIV)*.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.