

A NEW LIGHT ON LIFE
THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

ACTS 9:1-22
APR 10, 2016

¹ But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; ¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. ²⁰ And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." ²¹ And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" ²² But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

Things look different when you have enough light.

It can happen that children are scared by some dark shape
in their room at night, that, when the light is turned on
turns out to be just some clothes thrown on a chair.

Adult eyes are fooled by lack of light as well.

There have been times I have gotten dressed
without turning on light & later discovered,
that what I thought was black was actually blue
and what looked white was actually beige.

Paul, who sees the light of Christ in text,
later writes to Corinthians that now we see dimly
but time is coming when we will see God face to face.
From text we see that already now the light of God's word
gives us a new light on life.

CHRIST'S LIGHT CHANGES VIEWS OF WHAT IS GOOD
GOD, BY GRACE, CHANGES CURSES TO BLESSING.
FAITH CHANGES VIEWS OF SUFFERING AND SERVICE.

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²² But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews
who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

Light is what makes you able to see things, but sometimes,
like when you are driving toward setting sun, light can blind.

At first, Paul was blinded by living in the light
of what he thought was doing good and being right.

Many would have agreed that Paul was a good person.

He zealously tried to keep all God's commandments
including regular worship in temple by offering sacrifices.

And, consistent with his idea of being good,
he was opposed to any who didn't worship God this way
especially those who taught that no one needed to.
and so the right thing to do was to put a stop to it.
and punish the wrongdoers.

Some say is good to pursue what you are passionate about.

But as good as the light of God's law is, looking at that alone
caused Paul to squint and so not see
the ways he failed to keep the whole law perfectly
and the greater goodness of Jesus who brings us God's love
and his greater sacrifice which gives full forgiveness,
until Jesus gets right in Saul's face and says,
"Why are you persecuting me?"
Saul realizes this voice from heaven must be God
but he replies, "persecute? Me? What do you mean?"
Anyone who thinks it is possible for their lives and behavior
to be clean and spotless enough to please God
is in the dark and closing their eyes to the truth
and is saying that Jesus, the savior, is worthless,
and so is rejecting God.
When Saul hears, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."
He sees in a flash that Jesus must be God
and that therefore he is a murderous bad person.
In the three days he has to focus on thinking about this,
this truth sheds new light on everything he knew
about the Old Testament
And he begins to see how all the sacrifices and kings
are just shadows of what God does for us through Jesus.
As a result, his life is dramatically changed.
He who came to Damascus to seek and find Christians
and lead them away as captives to prison
is himself led into Damascus as a helpless man
but his eyes are opened to the fact that it is God
who seeks and finds us who are helpless sinners
and leads us to come to him by grace.
It may not seem as dramatic, but same Jesus comes to us
just as miraculously today in his word & sacraments
to produce the same result of transforming our lives
by showing us our sin and showing us our savior.
Any time we try to somehow make ourselves good
we get off track and on the wrong side of God
but seeing that it is Jesus who makes us good
is what straightens our lives out, because...

GOD, BY GRACE, CHANGES CURSES TO BLESSING.

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the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the

synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

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God not only brings about amazing changes
but he does it in amazing ways.

In the chapter before this, attempt to stomp out church
in Jerusalem cause it to spread to places like Damascus.

Now God uses light to cause blindness,
then uses Paul's blindness to cause him to see the light.

Next he uses a man that Paul wanted to find and kill
to come and find him to give him new life.

As result, Paul, who cursed Jesus' name & wanted to wipe it out
proclaims Jesus' name boldly
and he who wanted to be a great destroyer of church
becomes a great builder of the church.

Later, he sees how, when he himself is in prison
for preaching the Gospel, it actually promotes the gospel.

All this is no accident, just as I think it is no accident
that Paul's three days in darkness mirror
Jesus' three days in the tomb before his resurrection.

The greatest example of God's turning a curse into a blessing
is Jesus being cursed with our sins
and suffering and dying in our place
in order to bless us with forgiveness and new life.

It is all because of this and through this that God continues
to snatch all the devil's weapons from his hands
and use them against him.

He tears down in order to build new.

He uses persecution to spread the gospel.

He breaks in order to heal.

He brings us through death to bring us to new life.

He uses sadness & loneliness to bring us closer to him.

He uses suffering to make us stronger.

That does not mean that any of these themselves are good.

It is God who is so good he can use even evil to do good.

When we see this,

FAITH CHANGES VIEWS OF SUFFERING AND SERVICE.

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¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; ¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened.

Today's readings are about those chosen for God's purposes.

2nd reading is about the lamb who is worthy
because he has died and risen again.

Gospel tells of Peter who was unworthy to speak for Jesus
because he had denied him, being restored to service.

In text God says he has chosen Saul as his instrument
but first he chooses Ananias to serve him.

Ananias didn't care for either of these choices at first.

He was sure God's plan would end in his suffering.

But he became willing to risk that in order to serve God.

God says of Saul that he himself will be shown
what he must suffer for the sake of his name.

I don't know about you, but to me suffering looks like
something to be avoided.

For that matter, hard work is something to be avoided.

But text leads us to look at both suffering and service
as tools used by God for good, including our good.

Just as it is not our goodness that makes us
worthy to be with God and loved by God

we do not have to worry that it is our goodness
that makes us worthy to be servants of God.

God says of Saul that he is his chosen instrument.

He is simply a tool in hands of the wise & powerful God.

Word for instrument in v. 15 literally means vessel, container
So Ananias rightly says he will be filled with Holy Spirit.

This is why Ananias boldly risked and did what he did
and why Paul boldly went on to do what he did
because he saw serving God in a new way.
At first he wanted to make his own choices,
and serve God with his own power
but now, instead of seeing himself as God's policeman
in charge of making people do what is right,
he was God's pitcher, full of his love and grace
and carrying it to others who needed it.
Saul was zealous and powerful, although at first misguided.
Ananias was plain and matter of fact, although first hesitant,
Each had their own preconceived ideas about who
deserved to receive God's blessings
but both were used by God for his special purpose
even though they were unlikely tools.
God may not intend for us to be a Saul preaching to the world,
but he may intend us to be an Ananias, being bold enough
to speak God's word to one we don't think will accept it.
Both Ananias and Saul were sent because people can't
heal themselves of their own sinful blindness.
Each of us also has opportunities God has planned
and sets before us to serve as his tools and vessels.
We can trust him to use us in his service
even when it may look like suffering
because we have seen Jesus and what he does.

CHRIST'S LIGHT CHANGES VIEWS OF WHAT IS GOOD
Saul thinks he is good, & doing good by going out of his way
to find and persecute those who believe in Jesus
but God finds him and shows him Jesus is God.
GOD, BY GRACE, CHANGES CURSES TO BLESSING.
Saul is changed from an agent of death to an agent of life
when Jesus, who's death for us changes everything,
goes out of his way to bring Saul his grace.
FAITH CHANGES VIEWS OF SUFFERING AND SERVICE.
We, like Ananias and Saul are chosen by God
and shown that what we are to do is go out of our way
to carry the word of God's grace to others.