

Acts 9:1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

(You can read the remainder of the text in your Bible.)

Dear Friends in Christ,

"I was hoping you wouldn't say that." When did you last speak those words? At the repair shop? You knew the car had problems, and you knew they might be big problems, but you were hoping. You were hoping maybe a few more months, maybe a few less dollars, maybe... But now you are faced with a bill that is bigger than the value of the vehicle. "I was hoping you wouldn't say that."

It happens with us and God. We have those moments where God talks to us and we say, "I was hoping you weren't going to say that." But that didn't happen back in Bible times did it? Those big names of the Bible, they didn't have their moments of doubt, did they? Disappointment bounced off them like hail off blacktop, didn't it? Sadness was a word unknown to them, wasn't it?

Hmmm. Looking at the reading today, I see great men whose shoulders slump. They said, if not to God, at least to themselves,

I WAS HOPING YOU WOULDN'T SAY THAT!

I. That You Wouldn't Tell Me to Change My Life

Saul is the first man to say those words. Now one thing we need to be clear about is who "Saul" is. Every long-term Christian knows the Apostle Paul. That Apostle Paul was a Jewish man who had the birth name of Saul. A decade or so after our reading, when he went to the Greek speaking part of the world, he changed his Jewish name, Saul, into a Greek name, Paul. Same man.

This Saul, thoroughly Jewish, was a guardian of the old Jewish way of life and faith, the life and faith that existed before Jesus was born. He was willing to go to extreme measures to protect the old Jewish ways. When the first Christian was killed for his faith, we hear these chilling words, "*And Saul was there, giving approval to his death*" (8:1).

Not content with that, he sought to uproot and destroy every bit of this Christianity, wherever he could find it. Reports were that many Christians were found in the synagogues of Damascus, a city 150 miles away. So "*[Saul] went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any [Christians]... he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.*" Saul's opposition to the Christian way, and thus to Jesus Christ was deep-seated; it was visceral.

Ninety years ago, in the Soviet Union, there was a Communist named Leon Trotsky. He was instrumental in the Russian Revolution. But when he fell out of favor, the Soviets tried to get rid of him completely. They deleted his name from the monuments, from the history books. Even mentioning his name could be a criminal act. Well, that is basically what Saul wanted to do with them name of Jesus.

And then the Lord Jesus appeared to him. In a spectacular vision the risen and glorified Jesus appeared to Saul: "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*" No longer could Saul deny the reality of a risen Jesus. Jesus *had* risen from the dead. Jesus *had* been taken to heaven. Jesus was now seated at

the right hand of God in heaven.

Saul had to say, “I was hoping you wouldn’t say that.” Of course, he felt it much more deeply than what you feel when your mechanic has bad news. Jesus’ appearance shook Saul to the foundation. He felt anxiety and shock like most of us feel maybe once or twice, or maybe never, in our lives. **“For three days he... did not eat or drink anything.”** He was shattered. He realized that his old values were worthless. The treasures he had worked for were just sand slipping through his hands. His zeal and his youth had been spent on lies. Sometimes, even when we know it is the truth we say, “I was hoping you wouldn’t say that.”

Here is a question: When did Saul become a believer? We might say, “On the road to Damascus.” Good answer. But, if I were going to be very strict, I would suggest that he did not come to faith on the road to Damascus. On the road he was confronted with the fact that his life was a lie, no matter what he thought; no matter how many thousands of others had cheered him as their hero. It was a lie. At the point Jesus confronted him, he had inner despair. But despair is not faith. And for three days Saul sat in a house, in the darkness of blindness, contemplating the wreck of his life. He was so distraught that he ate and drank nothing. Three days later, the Gospel was preached. Saul believed. He was baptized into the name of Jesus. His sins were washed away. That is where faith, forgiveness and new life began.

I have a relative who grew up on a farm. They worked hard. Every morning they milked cows, every evening too. Most of the summer they threw around several hundred 80 pound hay bales in between. Seven days a week, no vacations. When you got married, that was maybe the only time in a decade, or maybe your life, that you got a week off. One of the only sweet spots in that life is the food, especially the desserts. Dessert, every evening and lunch. And then the doctor’s diagnosis of Type 2 diabetes. “No more dessert.” “I was hoping you wouldn’t say that.”

That sounds trivial, but his entire life got re-ordered with that diagnosis —every meal, every snack.

Coming to faith is a complete re-ordering of our world. Christians are not born. By birth we are heathens, who will naturally no more stand for God’s way than Saul would when he left Jerusalem for Damascus. It is only through Baptism, or later through the word of Christ, that you became a Christian. In that moment, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in your heart, and you are changed. And now your basic operating principles are completely different from the non-Christian. That is why you and non-Christians around you often don’t see eye to eye.

Yet we cannot simply leave the people of this world, hoping they will figure it out for themselves. They cannot figure it out, unless they are confronted by Jesus. It is our job to confront them with Jesus, even if their reply is “I was hoping you wouldn’t say that.”

II.

In our reading, it wasn’t just unbelievers who said that to God.

We are introduced to a believer named Ananias. I don’t know if Ananias knew what had happened to Saul on the road outside Damascus. But he did know this: **“I have heard many reports about this man [Saul] and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”** Now if you were Ananias, and if you heard that Saul had been mysteriously struck down and blinded outside the city, and if you heard that for three days neither hide nor hair had been seen of him, what would you think?

I’ll tell you what I would be thinking: “Praise the Lord! An answer to our prayers. God took out Saul.” Oh, I wouldn’t have been trash-talking Saul. I just would have been glad that God had taken out the persecutor, just when he was about to show up in my synagogue! Yea, God!

And then comes the Lord to Ananias. “Ananias!” “Yes Lord—by the way thanks for taking out

Saul—anyway, what would you like, Lord?” ***“Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul.”*** And you can hear the alarm bells in Ananias’ mind. “He’s a madman. He murders Christians. He is the enemy. Don’t you know, Lord?” “Umm, Ananias. I’m God. I do know that. Now, go!”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t say that.”

There was a Lutheran woman working in a small manufacturing company. She was in charge of the shipping department. She was getting toward 60. Retirement wasn’t that far away. The plant manager came to her one day with very specific instructions. He told her he needed her to falsify the scales on the UPS shipping. So what’s your preference, employed or unemployed? “I was hoping you wouldn’t say that.”

Sometimes we find ourselves in those places. God tells us something, and it puts us up against our anxieties, our worries. Like Ananias we pray, “But Lord, doing what you are saying is going to cause me problems! I was hoping you wouldn’t say that!” But God doesn’t change.

Here is the amazing thing about it. Against every bone in his body, Ananias took God’s word to heart and went to Saul’s room. He greeted Saul, ***“Brother Saul.”*** Did you hear that? “Brother.” And in a few short minutes the one who once wanted to wipe Christianity from the face of the earth was himself a Christian. When we listen to things God tells us, even when he tells us to do things we don’t want to do—it is amazing how God can work in us.

By the way, that woman in the shipping department? She fared about like Ananias. She did not compromise *and* she kept her job, God be praised.

III.

Ananias’ visit is succesful. Saul is converted. See? If you just listen to God, everything turns out well. Right? But there is that one unnerving line from the reading. Did you hear it? It adds all kinds of uncertainty.

Oh, but uncertainty is what makes life interesting! If you like roller coasters, you know what I mean. The first time you ride a roller coaster there is a special thrill. The second and third time can be fun, but never quite as good. Or think of birthday presents. We could save a bit of money and a lot of bother if we would just hand unwrapped presents to people. Why all this elaborate mess of paper and ribbons and gawking spectators? It’s the uncertainty, the surprise factor. That’s what makes the moment.

Well, the new convert Saul had uncertainty in spades. ***“The Lord said to Ananias, ‘This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name to the Gentiles...’*** Now here it comes. ***“I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”*** Saul would know suffering, and he did. He would be beaten. He would be stoned nearly to death. He would be shipwrecked. He would be betrayed. He bore the scars of whipping.

Some of you can remember being confirmed as members of this church. Our confirmation rite ends with the words, “Go in peace.” What if the closing words were, “God will show you how much you must suffer for his name.” I’d guess confirmation would be the last day a lot of people would show their faces around here. But that’s what Saul got.

And God does say that sometimes. Now, I speak with great respect and humility here. I do not take anyone’s suffering lightly. The light difficulties I have felt in life are nothing compared to what some of you have felt. Sufferings of rejection, of loss, of continual pain, of failure, of stigma. But the Lord has asked some of us to bear those burdens. Our natural reaction is, “I was hoping, dear God, that you wouldn’t say that.” You can be certain that your Christian brothers and sisters are also pleading the same thing on your behalf. We are praying for you. We cannot know his reasons for allowing

suffering. But in the middle of those troubles, God tells us, “*Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*”

Saul, heard that his life to this point has been a waste... Ananias was sent to speak to the great enemy of the church, against all his worries... Saul, in his new life with God was told, “***I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.***” News like that from God, makes us say to our God, “I was hoping you wouldn’t say that!”

Do you know what it is that makes us say that to God? Basically it is sin. Oh, there is some sorrow mixed in there, a natural feeling of loss or pain. And that is ok. But all that would hold back any thing or any space or any time when God asks for it... anything that says, “It’s mine. Not yours. You have no right to that!” That is sin.

When God speaks to us, and our first impulse is to say, “I was hoping you wouldn’t say that,” God grant that that impulse is short-lived.

The only way around that sin is not to be more dedicated or more self-sacrificial. The only way around that sin is to confess it. I must take it to Jesus and admit that I have no right to withhold something from God. Even if it requires me to re-order my life, to face my anxieties, to undergo suffering. I need to simply trust in Jesus to remove that stain of sin from me. Amen.