

Third Sunday of Easter
April 22, 2007
Acts 9:1-19a

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

We Are God's Chosen Instruments

1. Chosen by his grace
2. Instruments to do his will

^{NIV} 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?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem.¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord-- Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here-- has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Dear Christian Friends,

There are two key questions that every person must answer for himself or herself. "Who am I?" and "Why am I here?" To neglect even to ponder these questions, or to answer them incorrectly, will most assuredly have consequences for the way we live our lives.

I believe that Saul had an answer for "Who am I?" He was a bright young Pharisee, an up-and-comer, energetic, assertive and charismatic. (Php. 3:4-6) As for the "Why am I here?" Saul had that answered, too. He believed that he was God's chosen instrument to destroy the Christian church while it was still in its infancy, going from house to house searching for Christians and, when he found them, dragging off both men and women and putting them into prison. (Acts 8:3)

But after the risen and glorious Jesus appeared to Saul on the way to Damascus, Saul's answers to those two key questions changed dramatically. In answer to "Who am I?" he was now "the worst of sinners" but also, thankfully, the recipient of God's abundant grace in Christ Jesus. (1 Tim. 1:16,14) And in answer to the second question, "Why am I here?" he still viewed himself as God's chosen instrument, but now no longer his instrument to destroy the church, but to build it up, specifically by preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles.

As we look into this account of Saul's conversion this morning, it's my prayer that we, too, will see that **We Are God's Chosen Instruments**, 1) chosen by his grace and 2) instruments to do his will.

1. Chosen by his grace

As you read Acts 9 and the epistles of Paul, it's clear that Paul believed that he had been chosen by God's grace. Saul, later Paul, certainly did not choose God. In his ignorance and unbelief, was doing exactly the opposite of what God wanted him to do. His life was a noxious cocktail of violence, blasphemy and persecution. And Jesus took these actions

of Paul's as if they were directed against him personally. *"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,"* the Lord said to Saul.

This chief inquisitor of Christians had made his debut at the stoning of Stephen. Here in Acts 9 he's still *"breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples."* Ananias, the man sent to lay hands on Saul, can scarcely believe what the Lord has commanded him to do. He contests the order: *"Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem."* But the order will stand. This is the man God chose.

Paul would have agreed that he was a strange choice to be the apostle to the Gentiles. In his earlier life, he despised both Gentiles and Christians. His conversion, his apostleship, and the fruits of his ministry were all a tribute to God's grace. Paul's conversion underscores how completely our salvation is by grace. It reminds us not to give up on reaching people who seem to be hard-hearted resisters of Bible truth. And Paul's conversion reminds us, personally, that we should never despair of God's grace and forgiveness, for Paul stands as an example of God's unlimited patience for those who would believe and receive eternal life.

Paul's story is really our story, too. The fact that we are confessing Christians has nothing to do with our merit or worthiness and everything to do with God's grace. Before the creation of the world God graciously chose us to be his own. That is to say, God chose us before we could do anything to influence his choice. In time God sent his precious Son to save us. God's Lamb surrendered his own life for wandering sheep like us. In 2 Timothy, Paul tells how God's grace came to light on Easter morning. **"This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."** (1:9-10) Like Saul, we were once lost. There was a time—maybe a short time or a long time—when we were blind to God's grace. But God sent some Ananias to us and the scales fell from our eyes and we could see Jesus. We, too, were chosen by grace.

Do you notice here in Acts 9, though, that before Saul has ever become a believer, God is already declaring what he's got in mind for Saul to do? He says, *"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."* And, in response to Ananias and his resistance to calling on Saul in the house on Straight Street, Jesus says, *"Go! This man is my chosen*

instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel." It's clear, isn't it, that God graciously chose Paul to be an instrument to do his will?

2. Instruments to do his will

My visit to the dentist this past week reminded me that dentists have all sorts of instruments that they use in order to preserve and repair our teeth. They range from the commonplace (floss and brushes) to the anxiety-producing (drills and nasty looking probes and scrapers) to the high tech (x-rays and lasers). When the dentist needs one of those instruments, he calls to his assistant who sees to it that the right instrument is put into his hand.

Paul was God's instrument. God's will was to preach to the Gentiles the manifold riches of his grace in Christ. It was counter-intuitive, but God knew that Paul, the Jew and former Gentile-hater, would be the right man to serve as his apostle to the Gentiles. So he used Paul's intellect and his work ethic and his cosmopolitan background and his thorough acquaintance with the Old Testament Scriptures and all the rest of that complex package that was Saul of Tarsus to do his will. Paul's life was an instrument in the hand of the Almighty God.

So is yours. God could run his kingdom like an inefficient administrator does: delegating nothing, doing everything himself. And God could do everything perfectly that way. But that's not how he chooses to do it. After he's chosen us by his grace and consecrated us for his service with the water of baptism, he uses us as his instruments to carry out his will. It becomes a case, as someone has said, of God having no hands but our hands, of God having no lips but our lips. The over-arching expression of God's will for us believers that we hallow his name. That means teaching his Word in its truth and purity and also leading holy lives according to it. Or as Jesus said in those familiar words at the end of Matthew, **"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."** (28: 19-20)

In you and me and our fellow Christians here at St. Peter, God has a wide variety of instruments: contributors and leaders and teachers and servers and encouragers. When each of us uses whatever gifts God has given us, then God is glorified, his church is built up, and we are blessed. If Jesus hasn't risen, then this whole subject of being God's chosen instruments to do his will is up for grabs. Then "Who am I?" and "Why am I here?" should probably be answered selfishly. But

since Jesus has risen, we can do as Paul encourages at the end of his great resurrection chapter and give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because we know that our labor in the Lord is not in vain.
Amen.