

Third Sunday of Easter; May 1, 2022  
Acts 9:1-19a  
"Jesus Knocks Us down and Picks Us up Again"

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any men or women belonging to the Way, he might bring them to Jerusalem as prisoners.

As he went on his way and was approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

He asked, "Who are you, Lord?"

He replied, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up go into the city, and you will be told what you need to do."

The men traveling with him stood there speechless. They heard the voice but did not see anyone.

They raised Saul from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could not see anything. They took him by the hand and led him into Damascus. For three days he could not see, and he did not eat or drink.

There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

He answered, "Here I am, Lord."

The Lord told him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. In fact, at this very moment he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he can regain his sight."

Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many people about this man and how much harm he did to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has authority here from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

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

Ananias left and entered the house. Laying his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, whom you saw on the way here, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. And after taking some food, he regained his strength.

He is sure he will find some in Damascus. Damascus is the closest big city outside of Israel. Damascus has many Jews. Certainly if he travels to Damascus he will find some Jews who follow what they call “the Way.” He will find them there in the synagogues of Damascus, hiding from the persecution that is threatening them in Israel. He will find these followers of “the Way” in the synagogues trying to convert their fellow Jews, trying to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah. He will find them there in the synagogues of Damascus, talking about how Jesus had died for sins and then rose from the dead.

And once he finds them, he knows exactly what to do with them. Men. Women. It doesn’t matter. If they follow the Way, if they believe in this Jesus, he will round them up, lock them up, and punish them – hopefully even get to kill them. And he knows he will find them there, right in the synagogues of Damascus. Easy pickings. So Saul asks the chief priest for permission to go to Damascus, find Jesus’ followers, and lock them up. He gets it. So he grabs a few henchmen and heads to Damascus.

To be fair, he is not going to Damascus to round up Christians just because he is a violent man. And he isn’t going to Damascus because he’s an atheist who wants to wipe all religion off the earth. No, he’s going to Damascus because he honestly thinks, in his heart of hearts, that he is doing something good in God’s eyes. He believes fully that the followers of the Way, the Christians, are heretics, blasphemers, and children of the devil. He thinks that locking them up will make God happy.

He thinks he is doing the right thing because he does not compare what he thinks to what God says in his Word. He knows the Old Testament backward and forward. Yet, he does not consider the prophecies about the Messiah and compare them to Jesus’ life. Nor does he listen to Jesus’ words and take them to heart. If he does, he will know and believe that Jesus is the Messiah. If Saul would only compare what he thinks to the truth of God’s Word, he would realize that Christians, the followers of the Way, are right about Jesus. And instead of locking them up, he would join their preaching in the synagogues.

But instead, he goes with chains and whips. Because he thinks – wrongly – that it is what God wants. And so the risen Jesus shows him just how wrong he is. Christ himself knocks Saul onto his back to show him just how wrong he is in what he was doing, and to show him how wrong he is about what God’s Word says. He uses a bright flash to knock Saul down physically. But even more important, Jesus knocks Saul down spiritually, exposing all his ideas about Jesus and his followers as dead wrong. With just a few powerful words the Lord knocks Saul flat: **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? ... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”**

The mistake Saul makes is not uncommon. Even for Christians like you and me. Many Christians also go through life thinking that their attitudes and actions are pleasing God when really those attitudes and actions are not at all in line with what God’s Word says. We may go through life thinking that God is smiling on our actions and thoughts. But we need to stop and compare what we are thinking and what we are saying and what we are doing to what God says in his Word. And when we do, we should prepare to get knocked on our back like Saul was.

Let’s try a couple of examples. Many Christians think that acting like they’re married before they actually are is something God approves of, or at least something he doesn’t mind. After all, you

wouldn't buy a car without test-driving it first, right? So why should you marry someone without trying them out first? Certainly God must be okay with that, right? It even seems like the responsible thing to do. And so many Christians never actually stop and compare what the Word of God says to what they think: **Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.** That passage will knock down a whole lot of Christians who have allowed their beliefs to be formed by the world around them and their own logic rather than the Word.

Let's try another. Many Christian parents apparently think that they are raising their children in a God-pleasing manner simply because they enroll them in a Christian school or Sunday school, and just leave it at that. But let's compare that attitude of, "It's the church's job to teach the Bible to my kids" to what the Bible actually says: **These commandments that I give you are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.** If Christian parents think that just dropping their kids off in a Lutheran parking lot is a God-pleasing way to raise them, the risen Jesus is ready to so some knocking down. Because that attitude does not square with his Word.

We could go on and on with examples: attitudes toward worship, entertainment choices, offerings, the government. But the point is that Jesus still speaks to people like you and me in his Word and knocks us on our backs. He does it by showing us when the attitudes and actions that we thought were God-pleasing or acceptable to God are not. He shows us when sin is a sin, just as he did for Saul. The important thing for us is to listen closely at what God's Word actually says is the truth. And when we do, we should prepare to have at least a few wrong ideas exposed for what they are.

Saul does not even deserve to get up off the ground outside of Damascus that day. You want to hear a subtle but extraordinary example of God's of grace? Here it is, in just three words: **He [Saul] got up.** After Jesus knocks Saul down with his powerful Word, he also picks him up in pure grace. And I don't just mean that he picks Saul up physically. Far more importantly, the risen Jesus picks him up spiritually.

God picks Saul up spiritually the same way he picks up everyone spiritually. Verse 17 of this story tells us that the Lord **filled [Saul] with the Holy Spirit.** And just how does the risen Jesus do that? The same way he always does. He uses a Christian in Damascus to teach Saul the truth about Christ and God's forgiveness. He uses Ananias.

Ananias is hesitant to go to Saul and speak words of forgiveness and grace to him. I'm sure we can understand why. Would you hesitate to make a visit to a serial killer who you think wants you dead? I would too. But after a vision from the Lord, Ananias goes anyway. And these are very first words out of Ananias's mouth when he meets this vicious, murderous Saul: **"Brother Saul..."** He calls him "brother!" And from that one word, "brother," all of God's grace comes rushing out.

Saul is already forgiven. He is already in the good graces of God and God's people. Because that same Jesus who had knocked Saul down has died and risen to take away Saul's sins – even the sin of persecuting Christians. Saul is the chief of sinners. He will admit that fact later, many times. But even though he is the chief of sinners, Jesus shed his blood for Saul. Saul learns first-hand the

significance of the hymn we just sang: “Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me. Died that I might live on high, lives that I might never die.” Jesus picks Saul’s soul up with that message of forgiveness.

Jesus also uses the forgiving waters of baptism: **Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized.** Notice that Jesus does not pick Saul up with the same shocking display he used to knock him over. No, when Jesus knocks us over with his Word the experience can be disturbing and jarring.

But when Jesus picks us up and forgives our godless attitudes, he uses a soft, gentle hand. He uses the quiet whisper of the gospel in his Word; he uses cool water. He uses humble bread and wine. After he knocks them over, Jesus picks sinners back up again without impressive displays and booming voices from the sky. He does it gently, dusting us off and soothing our fear with his forgiveness. As he picks us back up again, we find pardon for every attitude and action unchecked by his Word. They are all gone, along with all our other sins, paid for by him. The gentle, sweet gospel of our risen Jesus picks us up again.

We were in the same boat as Saul. Chiefs of sinners, all of us, having defied God’s will. So these words go for us, too: “Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me. Died that I might live on high, lives that I might never die...Only Jesus can impart comfort to a wounded heart; peace that flows from sins forgiven, joy that lifts the soul to heaven.”

After God picks Saul up, he sends him out on a mission: to travel the world and preach the gospel of Jesus to everyone he can find. And that’s exactly what Saul, now calling himself Paul, does. Part of that mission is suffering for the risen Jesus. Jesus had said, **“This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel. Indeed, I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”**

It sounds odd, doesn’t it, that part of being picked up by Jesus’ forgiveness and serving him is suffering for him? But throughout his life, Paul will find this pattern repeating. He is constantly knocked down by physical and mental suffering throughout his travels and his preaching. But every time he is, Jesus is there to pick him up again and make him spiritually stronger than ever before.

Suffering is another way that our Savior can knock his people down. These falls, too, are harsh, difficult, and unpleasant. But he only allows us to suffer so that he can pick us up each time we do. He only lets us sit in pain so that when he picks us back up and comforts us with his love, we grow stronger in him every time.

Whether it is with the Word or the sufferings of life, the risen Jesus has the power to knock us down. When he does, the falls can be harsh and difficult. But every time he does, he is always there to pick us up gently with his gospel, to quietly forgive us and strengthen us with his love. Amen.