St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Perth
Sunday, October 25th, 2026
Rev. Gerry Gallant

From Persecutor to Preacher
Proper 25
Acts 9:20-31

Welcome

Announcements

Call to Worship

Come, let us worship the risen Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who calls sinners out of darkness and into his marvelous light.
We will praise the Lord who has shown us mercy and made us his people.

Walk in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.
Build us up by your Word, O Lord, and multiply your praise among the nations.
To the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be glory forever. Amen.

Prayer of Adoration and Invocation

Holy and gracious God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—you alone are worthy of all worship. You are sovereign in mercy, mighty to save, and faithful to every promise. We adore you for sending your eternal Son, Jesus Christ, who obeyed in our place, bore our sin upon the cross, rose victorious from the grave, and reigns at your right hand. By your Holy Spirit, turn our hearts from distraction and self-reliance. Give us reverence before your holiness, confidence in your grace, and joy in your presence. Receive our praise, speak to us through your Word, and build us together as the living temple of Christ. We ask this in his matchless name.

Call to Confession

Beloved in the Lord, the God who is light exposes the darkness within us, yet the God who is rich in mercy welcomes all who come through Jesus Christ. Let us therefore draw near with honest hearts, confessing our sins and trusting not in our own righteousness, but in the finished work of our Saviour.

Prayer of Confession

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed. We have resisted your rule, trusted our own wisdom, and failed to love you with our whole heart. We have judged others by their past, neglected quiet acts of faithfulness,

and sought our own praise rather than the glory of Christ. Forgive us for the sake of Jesus, your Son. Wash us in his blood, clothe us in his righteousness, and renew us by your Holy Spirit. Teach us to walk in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Spirit, so that our lives may bear witness to your transforming grace. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Hear the good news: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. All who repent and trust in him are forgiven, clothed in his righteousness, and received as children of God. In Christ, your sins are pardoned. Thanks be to God.

Childrens' Song #570: "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus" (V 1,2,4)

I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
No turning back, no turning back.

The world behind me, the cross before me,
The world behind me, the cross before me;
The world behind me, the cross before me;
No turning back, no turning back.

Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
No turning back, no turning back.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name
Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one
For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory,
Forever and ever, Amen.

Hymn 438: "When Morning Gilds the Skies" (V 1,2,4)

When morning gilds the sky,
my heart awakening cries:
May Jesus Christ be praised!
Alike at work and prayer

to Jesus I repair:
May Jesus Christ be praised!

To God, the Word, on high,
the host of angels cry:
May Jesus Christ be praised!
Let mortals, too, upraise
their voice in hymns of praise:
May Jesus Christ be praised!

Be this, when life is mine,
my canticle divine:
May Jesus Christ be praised!
Be this the eternal song
through all the ages on:
May Jesus Christ be praised!

Responsive Reading

Psalm 96:1-9

96 Oh sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth!
2 Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.

3 Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples!
4 For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be feared above all gods.

5 For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
6 Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

7 Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength!
8 Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts!
9 Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth!

Anthem (Music Ministry): "How Beautiful"

Prayer for Illumination

Scripture

Acts 9:20-31

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.

Saul Escapes from Damascus

23 When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, 24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, 25 but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

Saul in Jerusalem

26 And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. 28 So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. 30 And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

Sermon

Saul's conversion is one of the clearest pictures of what the grace of Jesus Christ can do to someone's life. At the start of Acts 9, Saul is breathing threats and murder. He is traveling to Damascus with the authority and approval of the religious organization to arrest Christians.

Yet by verse 20, the same man is standing in the synagogues and declaring, 'Jesus is the Son of God.' Saul has not simply taken up a new interest or changed sides in a religious debate. He has been conquered by grace.

His meeting with the risen Christ stopped him, exposed his sin, forgave him, and claimed him. That is what conversion is. It is not adding a little religion to an otherwise unchanged life. It is being brought from darkness into light, from ruling ourselves to living under Christ's rule, and from trusting our own goodness to resting in the righteousness of Jesus. Paul later wrote, 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation'. Saul lived that truth before he ever wrote it.

The Scriptures tells us that Saul began preaching 'immediately.' He did not understand everything yet, but he knew the One who had saved him. He went into the synagogues because their worship allowed a trained Jewish teacher to reason from the Law and the Prophets. Saul had studied under Gamaliel, one of the leading rabbis of his day. Now Christ redirected all that learning toward the Gospel. Saul's first claim was bold: 'He is the Son of God.' In the Old Testament, Israel is called God's son, and the promised King from David's line is also called God's Son.

Saul had met the risen Jesus in heavenly glory. Jesus is not merely a human ruler with an honored title, Saul knows that He is the eternal Son who took on our humanity, obeyed in our place, died for our sins, and rose in victory. Saul began his teachings with the foundation of the Christian faith: Jesus Christ is truly the Son of God and the only Mediator who can save.

The people were amazed because Saul's message was the complete opposite of his reputation. They knew the damage he had done in Jerusalem. The Greek verb behind 'made havoc' carries the idea of ravaging or laying waste. Saul had treated the church like an enemy city that needed to be destroyed.

Now the destroyer was building up the very church he had tried to tear down. One of the Gospel's fiercest enemies became one of its strongest witnesses, not because Saul discovered hidden goodness in himself, but because Christ showed him sovereign mercy.

Augustine spoke of divine grace as God's power to turn resistant hearts toward himself. Saul shows us what that means: Christ did not wait for him to become willing. Christ met him in rebellion and made him willing.

Verse 22 says that Saul 'increased all the more in strength.' The Greek verb *enedynamouto* speaks of being strengthened or empowered. This was not Saul relying on a forceful personality. God was giving him strength as he brought the Scriptures together and showed that Jesus is the Christ.

The word translated 'proving,' *symbibazōn*, can mean joining things together. Saul placed promise beside fulfillment: the promised offspring, the suffering servant, the rejected stone, and the risen King. He showed that the whole Bible finds its center in Jesus. Saul

knew the law so well that his hearers could not answer him. Those who thought they had silenced Stephen now faced another powerful witness. Yet Saul was not trying to win an argument for its own sake. He was pointing people to a Person. True Christian witness does not say, 'Look at me.' It says, 'Look at Christ.'

Acts 9:23-25

23 When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, 24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, 25 but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

Then the tone changes: 'When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him.'

Galatians 1:17–18 helps us understand this period. Saul spent time in Arabia, returned to Damascus, and went to Jerusalem after three years. The Scripture does not tell us everything that happened during those years, but it makes one truth clear: obedience did not make Saul's life easy. Jesus had already said, 'I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name'. The persecutor became the persecuted. The man who entered Damascus with official letters now had to leave the city hidden in a basket.

Also, notice how ordinary Saul's rescue was. No earthquake opened the gate, and no angel blinded the guards. A few disciples found a large woven basket, brought Saul to an opening in the city wall, tied ropes to it, and lowered him into the darkness. God's providence is no less divine when He works through ordinary means. Matthew Henry said that the Lord knows how to deliver the godly and provide a way of escape. John Gill added that believers may properly use wise and practical means to preserve life. The reality is that faith is not recklessness. Saul did not need to prove his courage by walking through a guarded gate. Sometimes faith stands in public and speaks. Sometimes faith climbs into a basket. In both situations, faith obeys Christ.

We often imagine that being useful to God will look impressive. Saul's escape looked less like a victory march and more like being shipped over a wall. Years later, he included this event among the stories of his weakness to show that Christ's power is made perfect in weakness. We may feel weak, awkward, and uncertain, but our Father is never absent. His strong hand often works through means that seem unimpressive. The basket was not a defeat. It was God's chosen road to Saul's next place of service.

Right now, some of you may be in a 'basket season.' Of your life. You expected an open door, but the Lord gave you a narrow window. You expected visible fruit, but he has

assigned you quiet faithfulness. You expected quick progress, but he is teaching you patient dependence. Do not despise this season.

Saul would spend years away from the center of attention before Barnabas brought him to Antioch. Those hidden years were not wasted. Christ was preparing his servant. Our calling is not to make ourselves noticed. Our calling is to be faithful where Christ has placed us, trusting that he knows both the work he is doing and the worker he is shaping.

> **Acts 9:26-30**
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> **[26] And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. [27] But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. [28] So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. [29] And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. [30] And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.**

When Saul reached Jerusalem, he faced another trial. He tried to join the disciples, but they were afraid of him and did not believe that he was truly a disciple.

If you think about it their caution makes sense. Some may have lost friends or family because of Saul. Grace does not ask us to pretend that wounds never happened. Christian forgiveness is not careless denial, and trust may take time to rebuild. Still, fear cannot have the final word in our lives.

Verse 27 begins with two beautiful words: 'But Barnabas.' Barnabas took Saul to the apostles and told them what Christ had done. Where others saw only Saul's past, Barnabas also saw the evidence of grace.

Barnabas did not lower the church's standards or ask the believers to ignore wisdom. He gave clear testimony: Saul had seen the Lord, the Lord had spoken to him, and Saul had preached boldly in Damascus.

The church needed both discernment and charity. Rudolf Gwalther, a Reformation preacher, praised Barnabas for defending the good name of a man whom almost everyone suspected and Matthew Henry called the act of bringing a young convert into Christian fellowship 'a very good work.'

Churches still need this ministry. Every congregation needs people who notice the newcomer standing alone, listen carefully to a testimony of grace, make room at the table, and help someone move from the edge of the room into the shared life of Christ's people.

Barnabas became a bridge across a gap Saul could not safely cross alone. He did not save Saul—only Christ saves—but he helped Saul enter the fellowship Christ had purchased with his blood.

Many new believers need encouragement, a wounded Christian may need patient friendship, and a person with a difficult past may need someone mature enough to recognize real repentance without abandoning wisdom. Barnabas could not yet see the missionary journeys, the churches Saul would help plant, or the New Testament letters he would write. He simply did the next loving thing.

Once the believers received him, Saul moved freely among them and preached boldly in Jerusalem. He debated the Hellenists, Greek-speaking Jews like those who had opposed Stephen in Acts 6. The irony is powerful. Saul had approved Stephen's death. Now he stood where Stephen had stood, preached the same Christ, answered the same objections, and faced the same murderous anger. Stephen's witness had not been wasted. His dying prayer, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them', received a remarkable answer in Saul's conversion. We should never measure the fruit of faithfulness only by what we can see today. A seed may lie under the soil through a long winter, but God has not forgotten it.

Once again, the brothers learned of a plot against Saul. Once again, they helped him escape, this time through Caesarea and on to Tarsus. Protecting him was not cowardice; it was an act of love. They understood that one servant is not the whole mission. Christ can send one worker away and still move his church forward. He can move Saul to Tarsus and raise up Peter somewhere else. He can close one field and open another. The future of the church does not depend on our ability to remain visible or central. It rests on the reigning Lord Jesus, who promised, 'I will build my church'.

Acts 9:31

31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

Verse 31 pulls the camera back: 'So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up.'

God's Word speaks of the 'church' in the singular. Believers were spread across many places, but they were one people under one Lord, filled by one Spirit, and trusting one Gospel.

The church was 'being built up.' The Greek word *oikodomoumenē* comes from the language of construction. Christ was fitting living stones together. This building involved growth in numbers, but it meant more than that. The believers were also growing in faith, knowledge, love, and holiness. A large crowd is not necessarily a healthy church. A healthy church is one where Christ's truth shapes the mind, Christ's love guides relationships, and Christ's holiness marks daily life.

Then the Scripture adds that the church was 'walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.' These two realities belong together. The fear of the Lord is not the terror of a condemned prisoner waiting for punishment. This fear is the reverent awe of children who know that their Father is holy, good, and near. It means taking God seriously, hating what he hates, loving what he loves, and ordering our lives under his Word. The word translated 'comfort,' *paraklēsis*, is broad enough to include encouragement, consolation, and strengthening. The Holy Spirit does not make us casual about God. He makes us both reverent and secure. He humbles us before the Lord's majesty and assures us of the Lord's mercy.

John Calvin warned that the church must not waste seasons of peace in comfort and idleness. When the Lord gives rest, believers should use it to grow in godliness; when persecution returns, the Spirit's inward comfort will sustain them. Peace is not permission to coast. It is a gift for prayer, discipleship, hospitality, teaching our children, strengthening marriages, helping the weak, and carrying the Gospel into our community. Christ gives his church seasons of rest so that we may become rooted in truth and ready for service.

Also, notice also who receives the glory: the church 'multiplied.', the wording turns our attention away from human technique and toward God's action. The believers proclaimed Christ, welcomed one another, walked in reverence, and depended on the Spirit. God gave the growth. Paul later said, 'I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth'.

This means that we should plan carefully, teach clearly, pray earnestly, and love faithfully. But we cannot give anyone a new heart or manufacture spiritual life. Only God can turn a persecutor into a preacher, a stranger into a brother, and scattered believers into a living temple. This truth does not make us passive. It makes us humble, prayerful, faithful, and hopeful.

Look at the way that Christ used ordinary disciples around Saul. Ananias was not a famous apostle, and those who handled the basket are not even named. Yet each took part in God's great work.

The same is true in every true church. Christ strengthens his people through quiet acts: a prayer before sunrise, a meal for a grieving family, a child taught the gospel, a discouraged believer called, or a visitor welcomed after worship. Heaven remembers what history forgets. The Lord uses ordinary faithfulness to carry forward his extraordinary purpose.

This quiet faithfulness is also connected to the church's gathered worship. Believers come together to hear the Scriptures read and preached, to pray, to sing, and to receive the signs Christ has given to strengthen faith.

These practices may seem ordinary, but the Holy Spirit uses them to build up the body. The church grows strong not by chasing constant novelty, but by returning again and again to Christ through the means he has appointed. In worship, reverence and comfort meet: we stand before the holy God, and we hear again that sinners who trust in Christ are welcomed, forgiven, and kept by grace.

Brothers and sisters, as you can see the main thread through this passage is not Saul's courage, Barnabas's kindness, or the church's wisdom. At the center stands the living Lord Jesus.

He changes Saul, gives him a new message, preserves him through danger, provides Barnabas, and builds the church by the Holy Spirit. Acts 9 begins with a man trying to destroy Christ's people and ends with the church enjoying peace, being built up, and multiplying.

And the same Jesus who met Saul on the Damascus road is risen and reigning today. He still saves sinners. He still breaks the pride of resistant hearts. He still strengthens weak servants, joins living stones together, and comforts his people through the Holy Spirit. He is building his church, and he sends every one of his faithfuls servants into the world as the Salt of the earth and the Light of the world—not to draw attention to ourselves, but so that others may see the fruit of his grace and give glory to our Father in heaven.

Let us pray,

Almighty and most merciful Father, grant us grace to obey your call. Turn our hearts from self-rule to the glad service of Jesus Christ. Where we are proud, humble us; where we

are fearful, strengthen us; where we are wounded, comfort us; and where we are suspicious of your work in others, give us the charity and wisdom of Barnabas. Preserve your servants in danger, make us faithful in hidden places, and teach us not to despise the ordinary means by which you accomplish your extraordinary purposes. Build up your church in truth, love, and holiness. Make us walk in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. And let all our witness say not, "Look at us," but "Look to Christ," until many are brought from darkness into his marvelous light. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Invitation to Offering

Having received every good gift from the hand of our gracious God, let us return to him a portion of what he has entrusted to us. We give not to earn his favour, but in grateful response to the mercy already given to us in Jesus Christ. Let us offer our gifts with cheerful hearts for the building up of Christ's church and the spread of his gospel.

Offering Prayer

Gracious Father, all that we are and all that we have come from you. Receive these gifts as signs of our gratitude and trust. Use them to proclaim Christ, care for those in need, strengthen your church, and extend the witness of the gospel in our community and beyond. Make us faithful stewards of every blessing, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Offering Hymn #830: "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow"

Praise God from Whom all blessings flow,
Praise Him, all creatures here below:
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Closing Hymn #592: "I The Lord of Sea and Sky"

I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard My people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin My hand will save.
I, who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear My light to them – whom shall I send?

Refrain
Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if You lead me;
I will hold Your people in my heart.

I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne My people's pain.
I have wept for love of them; they turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
Give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak My Word to them – whom shall I send? (Refrain)

I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them; My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide,
Till their hearts be satisfied.
I will give My life to them – whom shall I send? (Refrain)

Pastoral Prayer

Sovereign and gracious Father, we praise you for the gospel of your Son, which turns enemies into servants and strangers into brothers and sisters. Thank you that the risen Christ still saves sinners, preserves his people, and builds his church by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Strengthen us to walk in reverent obedience and settled comfort. Give courage to those who bear witness to Christ, endurance to those passing through hidden or difficult seasons, wisdom to those facing danger, and patience to those rebuilding trust. Make us a congregation marked by discernment and charity. Give us the attentive welcome of Barnabas, the quiet faithfulness of unnamed disciples, and a shared desire that Christ alone be seen and praised.

Remember those who are ill, grieving, lonely, anxious, or burdened. Provide for those in need, defend the vulnerable, restore the wandering, and sustain all who serve in demanding places. Grant wisdom to those entrusted with public responsibility, and restrain evil so that your people may live peaceful and godly lives.

Bless the food we are about to receive and the hands that have prepared it. Let our fellowship be warm, generous, and honouring to Christ. Use our conversations to encourage the weary, welcome the newcomer, deepen friendship, and strengthen the unity of your church.

Send us into the coming week as salt and light. Keep us humble, prayerful, faithful, and hopeful, trusting that you alone give the growth. We ask all these things through Jesus Christ, our Lord and only Mediator. **Amen.**

Benediction

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, who calls us out of darkness and clothes us in his righteousness, keep you in his unfailing mercy.

May the love of God the Father, who receives us as his children and orders all things for our good, hold you steadfast in faith.

May the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, who comforts the weary, strengthens the weak, and builds the church of Christ, abide with you all.

Go now in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, bearing faithful witness to the risen Christ until the whole earth is filled with his praise. **Amen.**