

Sermon 5-5-19  
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W. Hempstead, NY

Based on the First Lesson for the Third Sunday of Easter, Acts 9:1-22

### **Alternate Universe**

Scripture doesn't say why Paul was a persecutor of Messiah's Church. But he admits he was. So, let me speculate that Paul, also known by his Jewish name, Saul, probably agreed with what the high priest and Sanhedrin accused Jesus of at Jesus' trial – blasphemy.

We know from the book of Acts that Saul the Pharisee had something to do with the trial of Stephen, Deacon and Martyr, before the same Sanhedrin. He either heard Stephen's testimony or was told of it. We also know that as a result of Stephen's testimony Saul became enraged and set about eradicating the other blasphemers who had believed in Jesus the blasphemer. And, once he had imprisoned every believer he could in Jerusalem, Saul set out to do the same in the cities that the surviving Jewish Christians had escaped to. Thus, one fine day he approached the city of Damascus about noontime. Suddenly, time stopped. Space parted and the heavens were opened. Jesus of Nazareth made one final appearance in His resurrected body to a witness – namely Paul. Paul later understood that it was an unusual appearance, since Jesus had ascended into heaven forty days after the resurrection. But, nevertheless, Jesus appeared to him.

Just like in His original resurrection appearances, Jesus appeared to a select person, not the general public. There were others traveling with Saul who didn't see the resurrected Jesus at all. They only knew that something weird was happening. Thus, Jesus wanted Saul as a witness of His resurrection, not the others. And with that appearance, Saul the Pharisee's life changed forever.

We heard in this morning's first lesson that the Lord gave Ananias grace to overcome his fear of Saul. And Ananias obediently went to lay hands on Saul so that Saul might be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Again, our thesis is that this thing called being filled with the Holy Spirit occurs for very specific purposes. First, Paul was given this infilling that he might be converted from an unbelieving persecutor of Christ's Church to a believer in the suffering and victorious Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Second, Paul was given the infilling because He was one of Christ's chosen ones, in this case chosen as a witness of Christ's resurrection and an Apostle. Third, Paul was going to need all the courage the infilling gives because he was going to suffer much on account of Jesus. Fourth, Paul was given the infilling of the Spirit so that he could see both the suffering and victorious Messiah hidden in plain sight in Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. We know this because he immediately began to confound argumentative Jews with the Scriptures. Through the infilling of the Spirit Paul found it easy to prove from the Scriptures he had intensely studied all his life that Jesus is the true Messiah.

With this conversion experience, Paul passed into an alternate universe. He left this fallen universe where a man claiming to be Messiah was put to death by crucifixion and three days later his tomb was open and the body was missing. By conversion Paul passed over into the true universe where Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and resurrected, is the glorious King of kings and Lord of lords. That's what conversion does. It literally brings us into an alternate universe, the universe described in the Word of God and received by faith in His Word. For through conversion the Word of God begins to pop open for us. In God's Word we begin to see ourselves not as we are but as we shall be, justified and made righteous, by the grace of God.

Unlike the initial experience Paul had, most of us only get to peer into the alternate universe via the Word of God. But this definitely happens when Lord Holy Spirit fills us with the reality of what we're reading. Consider our second lesson this morning from Revelation as an example. It was the Apostle John who entered into the alternate universe via a visionary experience. But he wrote down what he saw and heard. Therefore, the words he wrote about the experience can transfer those who read them into the alternate universe by the faith the Spirit gives.

Personally, I recall a time years ago that I read through chapter five. When I arrived at the final verses of today's second lesson describing the living creatures round God's throne shouting out amen to the great song being sung by all in the universe with the twenty four elders falling down in worship before the Lord, it's hard to describe what happened, but in my spirit I fell down before the Lord with them in incredible joy and worship of Jesus my Lord and Savior, King of kings and Lord of lords. It has only happened once but the memory of that moment is a great joy in my life. Through Holy Spirit engendered faith in the Word, it was as if I was there in the midst of that worship.

John was given additional information about what he saw. It begins in Revelation 4:8, "Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.'" These living creatures must be related to the six-winged Seraphim Isaiah saw in the incredible vision he was given in chapter six of his book.

So we continue in Revelation 4:9-11, "9 Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: 11 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.'"

Two things here. First, no pagan can sing this song. The spiritually dead hearts of pagans can only deny their Creator.

Second, did you notice what the twenty-four human elders do when they fall on their faces before their Creator? They lay their crowns down before the Lord. The King James Version says they *cast* their crowns before the throne.

What exactly is that action? The twenty-four human elders wear crowns like kings. This means that Yahweh has crowned them with real righteousness, glory, authority, position and power in His creation. But unlike us earthbound people,

these glorified humans can easily cast all the righteousness, glory, authority, position and power they have been given back to the giver of all such qualities, their Creator, Yahweh. This is the proper worship of our Creator at its most glorious.

For, we have to understand that Yahweh meant to give Adam and Eve great righteousness, glory, authority, position and power over His Universe. This is what the Image of God was all about. But instead of casting their crowns before their Maker, Adam and Eve tried to run off with Yahweh's gifts and call them their own. This is what Satan encouraged them to do. So they fell from the glory of God. They fell from His righteousness into the unrighteousness of the Likeness of God. And they transmitted this sinful nature to all of us, their descendants. The sinful nature absolutely prevents us from casting our crowns before our Maker – giving back to Him what belongs to Him.

But when conversion happens and the sinful nature is crucified with Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and the life of Christ through His Holy Spirit makes it possible even for us sinners to cast our crowns before our Maker. For, all that we are and have is His, belongs to Him and is meant to be cast before His throne in worship.

And then there's the singing in John's vision. Singing is an experience given to humans and angels to bring us into community with one another. We could say that those who can sing from the heart together become of one heart.

And in this morning's second lesson we see that it's not just the music that creates genuine community before the Lord. It's the words. For when all souls present can sing the same words from the heart it means that our Lord has won the War of Words. Those who can sing the same words from the heart become one in Yahweh's community of the faithful.

Consider the wonderful words of this song that the living creatures and twenty-four elders sang to Jesus, the Lamb of God. Revelation 5:9-10, "... 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. 10 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.'"

This is actually a song about the converted, the redeemed. It's a song about Christ's present and future Church. Jesus' sacrificial blood has purchased human beings back from sin, death and the power of the devil. That's the status we've been given in Christ here and we will experience it fully in the coming alternate universe. Therefore, confess this song with me. Jesus has bought me back from sin, death and the power of the devil. We are one community if we sing this confession together.

Now notice, we're not alone in this song. Every tribe, language, people and nation have been purchased by the same Lamb of God. This means that the redeemed are one with other redeemed people who don't look like them, talk like them, smell like them, dress like them, cook like them, sing like them. But we have one identifying feature as an alternate universe community. All together we cast our crowns before the throne of our Creator as one.

And it is the will of Yahweh that His community should be a kingdom and priests to serve Him. Kings have kingdoms. Our Creator has a kingdom and we, along with all these others of every tribe, language, people and nation, are that one kingdom,

that one people, that one community. Together, we all have allegiance to our one King.

And we are also priests of God to the unsaved. A priest has a special function on earth. A priest connects a human being with God and God with a human being through the actions Yahweh requires in order to receive sinners. These actions are the preaching of the Law and Gospel. They are the preaching of repentance, the forgiveness of sins and the filling with Lord Holy Spirit. They are the task of leading the spiritually dead to the life of the crucified and risen Christ.

Finally, the song of Revelation five makes our destiny clear. Those purchased by the blood of the Lamb will reign with the Lamb in righteousness, glory, power and authority forever and ever on the new earth. But even here on this earth we reign with the Savior if we are in Christ through the justification of our lives made by His blood.

Don't be deceived, reigning with Christ on this earth means that we will participate in His sufferings just like Christians are this very moment all across this rebellious world. But no matter what happens here, those bought with the blood of Christ who reign with Him here in suffering will reign with Him in complete victory on the promised new earth under the promised new heavens.

So, worship is the casting of our crowns before God's throne. It's the giving of all we have and are to our Creator. But, without the blood of the Lamb covering and justifying our sinful lives this kind of worship is impossible. For the sinful nature can only worship its own idols. And we need to beware of this constantly. It's all too easy to think we are worshiping the Lord when we're really worshiping ourselves and what a great group we are. This is one reason why we begin every service humbling ourselves in confession of sin and absolution. It's utterly humbling to know that we can only worship in Spirit and truth by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on our behalf. We can only have real community in the Lamb of God.

Forty years ago I heard a preacher instrumental in my conversion say this: "You haven't worshiped God until He has all of you." He said this on the basis of Romans 12:1, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship."

Offering our very bodies is casting all we have before the Lord. Understand that in the resurrection we'll be doing this on a regular basis. So, Yahweh shows His infinite grace and incredible power when through the blood of the Lamb we can begin doing this even here, clothed as yet in these sinful mortal bodies on this rebellious earth. But, with God all things are possible – even a resurrection from the dead. And when we cast all the things our bodies are meant to be and do before our Creator as our spiritual act of worship, it's amazing how much more productive and satisfied our lives become. Just a week or so ago, news came out that practicing Christians are far more satisfied in the physical union of their marriages than unbelievers. Imagine that. Offering our bodies before the Lord can do even that.

Therefore, in this hour let us worship. Let us sing with the heavenly host that we have been purchased for God by the blood of the lamb along with those purchased from all the tribes, languages, peoples and nations of the earth. Let us sing that our Lord has made us His kingdom and His priests to serve Him in righteousness and truth. As we reign with Christ on earth let us fall down in worship to the one who

has given us His forgiveness, righteousness, goodness and authority. Let us cast all that we are and have been given before His throne in worship. O Lord, pour out your Spirit so we might get a glimpse of your alternate universe through your Word or in whatever way pleases You. "To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ. Amen." (Romans 16:27)

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.