

### **Acts 9:1-19**

1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5 He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 8 Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 10 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." 11 The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." 13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; 16 I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 17 So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands-on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

### **"When God Calls"**

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This is a story of call and it is a story of conversion.

For Paul it is a monumental life-changing moment - one moment that changes the entire trajectory of his life. God calls out to him in a flash of light so brilliant it blinds him - it literally blinds him. He has seen the light, and his life after that moment is so dramatically different from his life before that moment that he is no longer the same person. Saul, the angry persecutor of Christ followers becomes Paul, passionate believer and missionary. Saul, the destroyer of churches, becomes Paul, the planter and nurturer of churches.

I'm not sure how many of us can relate to Paul's experience. I know Christians who have had Damascus-road type experiences - a profound moment that shocks them into faith or wakes them up to changes that need to happen in their lives. The alcoholic whose accident opens his eyes to the destructive power of addiction in his life. The basketball phenom whose athletic career is ended by an injury, only to discover an unrealized passion for writing and performing music. A diagnosis that reorders priorities. A tragic loss that that inspires a new life purpose. Those Damascus-road experiences happen. And when we hear those stories they inspire us. If you have had one of those experiences - I would love to hear about it! Let's have coffee sometime.

But, I've never had one of those experiences. And I suspect most of us haven't. Those dramatic call stories are rare, and special. But the ones that happen with a little less flair? Those are special, too. And just as important. Paul wasn't the only one called and converted in this story. And his marvelous transformation couldn't have happened if another person in the story hadn't answered God's call and had his own conversion experience.

Ananias. Now, Ananias I can relate to. Ananias was a faithful follower of Jesus. There were no flashing lights, or peals of thunder. Only a vision in the night, and the gentle voice of the Lord prompting him to go to Saul. Ananias knows who Saul is. The church in Damascus is aware of how he has been dragging Christians out of their homes and throwing them into prison and threatening them with execution. Ananias knows that the Lord is calling him to go and pray for, and lay hands on, and heal from blindness, his enemy. Ananias doesn't know about Saul's conversion. He doesn't know that Jesus has changed Saul's heart and mind. Is it any wonder Ananias was a little anxious about doing what the Lord had asked him to do? Ananias doesn't know what is going to happen, or how things will turn out. But he doesn't need to know. He only needs to know what the Lord has asked him to do, and trust that the Lord has a plan that isn't dependent on Ananias knowing or understanding.

We get this. This is how it is for us, too. God wakes us up in the middle of the night with someone on our minds, and all we can do in the darkness is pray, so we do. God whispers to us to call that friend we haven't spoken to in a while or send that "I'm thinking of you" card. God opens our eyes to someone who could use a few dollars for gas more than we need that fancy, expensive coffee beverage. God prompts us to start a conversation with the harried looking mother in the grocery store line beside us, offering her encouragement. God nudges us to invite our neighbor to church or invite a co-worker to Bible study.

Granted, none of those things are going to visit Saul the persecutor of your faith and inviting him to get to know Jesus at the risk of losing your life. But some of them probably paralyze us with fear as if they were. And just think about what we don't know. Is that homeless woman worthy of our financial support? Will that harried mother misinterpret our attempts at kindness as criticism? Will we alienate that neighbor or co-worker? Or will our act of faith plant seeds of hope in someone's life? We don't know. But we don't have to know. We only need to pay attention to what God shows us and calls us to do, and act accordingly.

But before we can act. We might need to recognize our own necessary change of heart. The conversion that had to take place in Ananias' life was a change of attitude towards Saul. Without knowing the whole story, he had to confront his own disregard and disdain for Saul. Saul was his enemy. If asked to describe Saul, he might have used words like cruel, merciless, brutal, inhuman. But God saw potential in him; he was part of God's plan. So, there must be more to him than that. "He trusted that Christ had a future purpose for Saul even though Saul's past *as he knew it* seemed to point toward a different future."<sup>1</sup> So Ananias goes and does as the Lord has commanded.

"In the end, then, Ananias' decision to go to the house of Judas on Straight Street (verse 11) to lay hands on Saul was a decision to risk his life to do the will of God. The result of that reluctant leap of faith is that Saul's eyes are opened and he is baptized, becoming part of (and eventually a leader in) the very church he sought to wipe out. Paul's conversion is one of the great stories of the early church, and it has rightfully inspired Christians from every generation. But hidden in its shadows is [this other] inspiring story...to which most [of us can] relate. We know nothing of Ananias beyond this story in the shadows. Acts does not tell us that he goes on to proclaim the gospel to the

Gentiles, found churches in urban centers across the Roman Empire, stand true to the gospel while on trial for his faith over and over again, and end up under house arrest in Rome awaiting a trial before Caesar. No, Ananias did not do any of these things so far as Acts is concerned. All Ananias did was to obey Christ's command to go pray with Saul *so that* Saul could do all those things. Without Ananias' prayer, Saul spends the rest of his life as a blind man wondering what his life might have been."<sup>ii</sup>

Who is the Lord calling you to reach out to? Who is the Lord prompting you to pray with and for? "Not all Christians are equipped to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, or teachers (Ephesians 4:11). But everyone can pray," every one of us can pray, "for and with those who have scorned the church and are scorned by the church. Not everyone can be Paul, but we all can and should be Ananias."<sup>iii</sup>

I suspect that last statement brought an image to mind for you – an image of someone who has wronged you, or caused you to feel threatened, an enemy. Hold the image of that person in your mind. And listen to this story: "A man once confessed to his pastor that even though he didn't think of himself as hating people, there was one person he really hated for the way the person had wronged him. The pastor advised him to pray for the person every day for two weeks -- pray *for* the person not *about* the person. When the man asked why he should do this, the pastor said, "I don't believe anyone can continue hating someone when they have consistently prayed for that person to be blessed by God. And, who knows, God may even answer those prayers and the person's life be blessed and changed in ways we cannot even imagine."<sup>iv</sup>

Friends, may we never stop believing that Jesus can transform people's lives, and may we never stop praying for it to happen. May we live like we believe the Sauls of the world can become Pauls. And may we never stop striving to answer as faithfully as Ananias does when God calls.

Alleluia! Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3414](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3414)

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3414](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3414)

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3414](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3414)

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3414](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3414)