

JESUS AND SAUL ON A STREET CALLED STRAIGHT

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If you had lived in the outskirts of Vienna, Austria, in the 1940's, the Nazis would have occupied the beloved city you once called home. Now the entire country has fallen under Nazi occupation. You are Jewish. Most of your relatives have vanished—arrested secretly in cover of darkness by armed soldiers. You've made the painful decision to gather your family and flee your comfortable home near the city of your birth and take refuge in a remote cottage far away in the mountains.

The night before the planned escape, you're awakened by a strange presence in your bedroom. Rubbing your eyes, you apprehensively sit up in bed and try to focus your thoughts. Am I dreaming? Fear grips you. Then, out of the darkness comes an unrecognizable voice saying, "Arise, go to a street named Wickenburg, just to the west of the campus of the University of Vienna. There you will find a home owned by Franz Kaiser. When you enter there, you'll find a man from Braunau, Upper Austria. His name is Adolf Hitler. I have appeared to him, and he is now praying. He is blind and I've revealed myself to him. Go and touch him, and he will receive his eyesight, and he will save your people."

You sit stunned, desperately trying to make sense of what you just heard. You can scarcely believe the command. Vienna is crawling with grim-faced Nazis carrying loaded weapons. Their orders are to seek out and capture Jews. Perhaps it's a set-up or a tasteless practical joke. No. The voice was real. The command clear.

Here's the question: Would you go? Would you believe that what you heard was true? Can you imagine yourself coming out of hiding and risking life and limb to find your way down a dark Vienna street and knock on the door of a home you've never visited?

Journey with me back through time to a real place in a real point in history. Come with me to Damascus, shortly after Stephen's death, during a period of intense persecution of Christians. Situated well over one hundred miles northeast of Jerusalem, the city, known for its fragrant gardens and fruited meadows, has been targeted by Saul and his fanatical band of extremists. There the Lord spoke to a disciple of the Way and commanded him to go to a house he had never visited, owned by a man named Judas he had never met. In

that house, the Lord said he would find a man, blind and praying. Not just any man, however. Of all things, he would encounter Saul of Tarsus, the dreaded enemy of Christians. As the messenger touched him and talked with him, the blind Pharisee would regain his sight, recover from his condition, and ultimately become God's chosen vessel. How's that for a surprising commission?

Remarkably, that is precisely the order Ananias received from the Lord in a vision. It was one of those once-in-a-lifetime assignments. Watch how the scene unfolds:

"And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord. And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth, and hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight." Acts 9:10-12.

The Lord gave Saul a vision that one, Ananias, would be paying him a visit. The Lord gave Ananias a vision requesting him to do some follow up work with one named Saul.

Imagine sitting in the very comfortable sanctuary where you and your family worship regularly. Suddenly, the cracking sound of a door flying open interrupts the stillness of the meeting. Armed men stream into the room carrying automatic weapons. The frowning leader barks, "Everybody! Up on your feet, now! Form a line in the rear of the building. Family by family, walk quickly outside into the parking lot of interrogation. Following that, you'll be ushered to vans waiting to take all of you downtown, where you will be forced either to deny your belief in Jesus or die for your faith." Most Christians living in the Western world would never expect that to occur. That happened regularly in Jerusalem. It was Saul who led the attacks, barking orders and breathing insulting threats.

It's no wonder then that the name "Saul" sounded like the name Hitler to a Jew living outside Nazi-controlled Vienna. Now we can understand Ananias' reluctance to do follow up work with Saul. "Ananias protested, 'Master, You can't be serious. Everybody's talking about this man and the terrible things he's been doing, his reign of terror against your people in Jerusalem! And now he's shown up here with papers from the Chief Priest that give him license to do the same to us.' But the Master said, 'Don't argue, Go!'" Acts 9:13-15 (The Message).

It can be a scary thing to go to some people and tell them about Christ. There are some people who you think are going to make fun of you. There are some people who you think are going to get angry with you. But when Christ speaks to us and tells us to go, we must go. Christ knows what He's doing.

Even if the person doesn't open their life, and doesn't respond the way Saul did, we must go when Christ says go. How they respond is not our responsibility; our only responsibility is to be obedient.

There are also some who claim to know God, but are spiritually blind like Saul was and they tend to get very angry, but go because you love Christ. Go because you know that He knows the whole picture and you don't. Go because you know that Christ can still penetrate the heart of anyone! It doesn't have anything to do with a personal issue with you.

"But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel." Acts 9:15. The Lord was pricking Saul's conscience to awaken him, because He had chosen him for a special work. Paul was "a chosen vessel," to bear the name of the Lord. A vessel does not itself do anything; it receives and gives out what is put into it. The work is done by the one using the vessels. This man was to bear the name of Christ before kings.

When we recall the cases of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4, 5), John the Baptist (Luke 1:13-17), and others that are specially mentioned in the Bible, together with the statement of Christ, that He has given "to every man his work" (Mark 13:34), we may well believe that God has a definite work for every one in the world, and that He is seeking to enlighten all in regard to that work, and to lead them to do it. Some shake off all instruction, casting the words of the Lord behind them, so that they never rightly learn what their work in this world is; others come to the point where they see clearly what the Lord would have them do, but are frightened at the hardships involved, and refuse to go out while others, like Saul of Tarsus, make an entire surrender, in view of the whole situation, and go forward in their appointed work with a light heart, because no trials ever come to them that they are not prepared for beforehand.

One of the magnificent 19th-century military expeditions conquered no new lands for Queen Victoria. You won't find it mentioned in history books, but because of the monumental logistics, military

historians compare the landing in Ethiopia in 1868 to the Allies' invasion of France in 1944.

For four years Emperor Theodore III of Ethiopia had held a group of 53 European captives (30 adults and 23 children), including some missionaries and a British consul, in a remote 9,000-foot-high bastion deep in the interior. By letter, Queen Victoria pleaded in vain with Theodore to release the captives. Finally, the government ordered a full-scale military expedition from India to march into Ethiopia—not to conquer the country and make it a British colony, but simply to rescue a tiny band of civilians.

The invasion force included 32,000 men, heavy artillery, and 44 elephants to carry the guns. Provisions included 50,000 tons of beef and pork and 30,000 gallons of rum. Engineers built landing piers, water treatment plants, a railroad, and telegraph line to the interior, plus many bridges. All of this to fight one decisive battle, after which the prisoners were released, and everyone packed up and went home. The British expended millions of pounds to rescue a handful of captives.

How much expense does God have to go through to get to you? What else does he need to do to get your attention? Christ has died your second death on the cross. Can you begin to appreciate the length and breadth, the height and the depth of the love of God for you?

“For I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake.” Acts 9:16. The Lord calls all to Him, that they may learn of Him, but the only way He can teach us some things is by affliction. “We must through much tribulation enter into the Kingdom of God.” Acts 14:34. Even Christ, “though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered.” Heb. 5:8. If we suffer with Him, we shall also be glorified together with Him. Rom. 8:17. Let affliction, then, of whatever sort it may be, everything that is crossing to our disposition, or seems to be contrary to us, even though it be the direct result of our own misconduct, be received as from the hand of the Lord, and we shall be sure to experience good from it. From our weakness, let us learn meekness; for “the meek will He guide in judgment: and the meek will He teach His way.” Ps. 25:9. Then instead of being obliged to be taught as the horse or the mule, we shall know what it is to be instructed in the way that we should go, guided by the eye of the Lord. Ps. 32:8, 9.

“And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house” (Acts 9:17). Only once is Ananias mentioned in the Bible, yet his name is as well known as that of Paul. All we know of him is that he was a humble “layman,” as men nowadays would call him. He was not known outside of Damascus, but he had “a good report of all the Jews which dwelt there.” This man was chosen to give instruction to the man who was to bear the name of Christ before kings. He himself could never have carried the message to them in person, but who shall say that his share in it is any less than Paul’s, or that he will have any less credit in the Judgment? What matters it that one is used but once as an instrument in God’s hands to accomplish His will? if we are always ready, so that when the time comes for which God created us, He can find us prepared for the emergency, it is enough. It is not what we do, so much as what we are willing to do, that counts with God. We may be sure that God will speak to the one who is nearest Him, and who best knows His voice.

So Ananias went to Straight Street, which is still Damascus’s main east-west thoroughfare, and to the house of Judas. “And putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.” Acts 9:17. Ananias placed his hands on him, perhaps to identify with him as he prayed for the healing of his blindness and for the fullness of the Spirit to empower him for his ministry.

Even more, I suspect that this laying-on of hands was a gesture of love to a blind man, who could not see the smile on Ananias’s face, but could feel the pressure of his hands. At the same time, Ananias addressed him as “Brother Saul” or “Saul, my brother.” I never fail to be moved by these words. They may well have been the first words which Saul heard from Christian lips after his conversion, and they were words of fraternal welcome.

Ananias has been called one of the forgotten heroes of the faith. There are countless numbers of them serving Christ behind the scenes the world over. Most we will never meet, we’ll never know by name. They are content to remain in the shadows, oblivious to the lure of lights and applause. Nevertheless, they are heroes—giants of the faith because of their selfless, understated acts of obedience to God. Faithfully showing mercy to the sick in the hospitals. Faithfully counseling and giving hope to the discouraged.

The Lord worked this miracle at the hands of Ananias. “And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.” Acts 9:17, 18. Saul’s mind as blinded by the traditions of the fathers, which had been drilled into him at the same time. The blindness which came upon him when the light shone round him on the way to Damascus, was but a picture of the blindness of his mind; and the seeming scales that fell from his eyes when Ananias spoke to him, indicated the shining forth of the Word within him, and the scattering of the darkness of tradition.

Ananias for this special purpose occupied such an exalted status that his words to Saul were the very words of Christ. Paul gives a fuller account of what Ananias said to him in Acts 22. “And he said, The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldest know his will, and see that Just One, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth.” Acts 22:14.

Ananias was a duly authorized prophet. It was as the spokesman of Christ—as His very mouthpiece—that he went to Saul. He had nothing to say beyond the words that the Lord put in his mouth. Ananias uttered the words, but as he did so it was Christ Himself who commissioned Saul to be His ambassador.

Ananias laid his hands on Saul, but it was the power of Christ that in the same moment enlightened his eyes and filled him with the Holy Spirit. Such filling with the Spirit was the indispensable qualification for the prophetic and apostolic service mapped out for Saul in the Lord’s words, “For thou shalt be His witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard.” Acts 22:15. Henceforth Saul performed this service as one endowed with heavenly power.

When Ananias came at the command of God, to baptize Paul, and restore his sight, he said: “The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, That thou shouldst know His will, and see that Just One, and shouldst hear the voice of His mouth. For thou shalt be His witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard.” Paul himself said that it pleased God to reveal His Son in him, that he might preach Him among the heathen. So it was not merely the appearing of Christ to Paul, but the revelation of Him *in* Paul. God said of Him: “He is a chosen vessel unto Me, to bear My name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel.” It was not enough for Paul to be able to say that he had seen the Lord; he must bear the image and superscription of the Lord about with him, so that all could become

acquainted with Him. Christ was revealed in Paul, in order that Paul might reveal Him to the world. Even so must it be with every one who is a witness for the Lord.

At the last day the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven and in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and in giving rest to His afflicted ones; for “unto them that love Him shall He appear the second time without sin and salvation.” Heb. 9:28. The same Jesus that appeared to Paul will appear to all the world, and in exactly the same manner—in light above the brightness of the sun. But His manifestation to Paul was His revelation *in* him, even as when He comes at the last day it will be “to be admired in all them that believe.” 2 Thess. 1:10. So He will be revealed in them all at that time. This shows, then, that the power given to Paul for witnessing for Christ, and the power given to every one who will receive it to preach the Gospel, is the power of the coming of Christ in glory. All the power by which the heavens and earth will be renewed,—the power of the world to come,—is at every man’s disposal for the preaching of the Gospel, and that means that it is ours for *living* the Gospel, since that is the only effectual way of preaching it. “All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth. Go ye, therefore, and teach,” said Jesus, “and, lo, I am with you alway.” This is the true revelation of Jesus Christ.

When Ananias had executed his commission and laid his hands on Saul, a flaky substance fell away from Saul’s eyes. The white films scaled away from the corners of his eyes. Luke uses some medical terminology here.

When my daughter had laser surgery performed on her eyes to correct her vision a few years ago, it was all done within minutes. It was an outpatient procedure. There was no discomfort in the recovery. Her vision has been perfect ever since so that she does not require glasses or contacts. But Saul’s divinely performed laser surgery was instantaneous.

Saul had been fasting and praying for three days prior to Ananias’s visit (Acts 9:9). Jesus had already reconciled Saul to God objectively by His death for him on the cross. Now Saul experienced that reconciliation to God whom he had been fighting, unwittingly, all along. He now had peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. His wrath against God was removed from his spirit giving him peace with God and personal, immediate access to the Father, as the Spirit witnessed with his spirit that he was the Father’s adopted child.

What was the content of his prayers? He prayed for the forgiveness of all his sins, especially his self-righteousness and his cruel persecution of Jesus through his followers. He prayed for wisdom to know what God wanted him to do now. He prayed for power to exercise whatever ministry he was to be given. No doubt also his prayers included worship, as he poured out his soul in praise that God should have had mercy on him. The very same mouth, which had been “breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples,” was not breathing out praises and prayers to God.

Ananias extended the invitation to Brother Saul, “And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” Acts 22:16. What! can one wash away his sins in baptism? Yes, certainly, if he calls on the name of the Lord; “for whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Rom. 10:13. The name of the Lord is a strong power, for it is Himself. His name is His life. To be baptized into the name of the Lord, is to be immersed in His life—hidden in Christ. It is impossible that such an one should be lost, for we are “saved by His life.”

Whosoever *calleth* on the name of the Lord shall be saved. It is not the one who has called, but the one who continues to call. “Every one that *asketh* receiveth,” not the one who asked once and left off asking, because he became discouraged. “Men ought always to pray, and not faint.” We must divest ourselves of the selfish idea that we pray merely for the sake of getting something from the Lord, and that, having obtained it, we need not call on Him any more. We should not regard the Lord as merely a convenient payer of the debts that we incurred. We call upon Him because His presence is good, and it is delightful to know Him. In Him we live; He is our life; and His life continually flowing saves us from sin and death. Thus real baptism is continuous, in that, being baptized into Christ, we abide in Him.

Once Saul regained his sight, it was probably Ananias who baptized him. Would that have been a great scene to witness? Standing waist-deep in a nearby river he could have said, “I now baptize you, my brother, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. You have been buried with Christ in baptism, rise to walk in newness of life.” What an unforgettable moment as the two men embraced, weeping with great joy.

Ananias enters and leaves the narrative, and we know nothing more of him. But as Saul’s first friend after his conversion, the first Christian to greet him as a brother, as well as the one who faithfully bore the

Lord's commission to him, he has an honored place in sacred history, and a special claim upon the gratitude of all who in one way or another have entered into the blessing that stems from the life and work of the great apostle.

One Sunday afternoon in Chicago, a group of ballplayers entered a saloon. When they emerged, they saw a group of people playing instruments, singing gospel hymns, and testifying of Christ's power to save from sin.

Memories of a log cabin in Iowa, an old church, and a godly mother raced through the mind of one of the ballplayers. Tears came to his eyes. Presently he said, "Boys, I'm through! I'm going to turn to Jesus Christ. We've come to the parting of the ways." Some of his companions mocked him, but others were silent. Only one encouraged him. He turned from the group and entered the Pacific Garden Mission.

Later that ballplayer told what occurred. "I called upon God's mercy. I staggered out of my sins into the outstretched arms of the Savior." That ballplayer was Billy Sunday who became known as a world-renowned evangelist and probably preached Christ to more people at that time than any other preacher.

When Christ gets a hold of someone, He will change their life! When Christ works in a person's life to save them, He will change them! Christ will make them into a new person, just like He did Paul. When Christ works in a person's life, he works powerfully, just like He did in Paul.

All Christ asks us to do is go. He will orchestrate the whole thing. He will give you the words to say. He will pour forth His power and His Spirit. And when He converts someone, they will start moving with Christ.

There was a shepherd who lived in Ireland. And his granddaughter went to visit him. While visiting with him, she walked into a barn and saw a young lamb with its leg in a splint. "She wondered what had happened, she wanted to know. "Oh," said the old shepherd, "he had a bad habit of running off, so the other day, I broke his leg."

When the old man told her that, she began to cry. "Why on earth would you do that", she asked. "Well", he said, "the little guy had a bad habit of running off. Every time he would do that, he would be in danger. He could fall off the edge of a cliff and kill himself, or a wolf or some other predator could find him, kill him and eat him. Every time he ran off, I would have to go find him. Then, I would set him with the

rest of the flock only to have him run off again. So, I broke his leg. But, that's not the end of it. After I broke his leg, I also mended it. I put a splint on it, all the while, I was talking to him, comforting him, consoling him. Now, I have to carry water in to him every day. Not only that, I have to feed him by hand. As I do, I continue to talk to him and comfort him. By the time his leg heals, he will know my voice. He will know that it is I who takes care of him. He will come when I call him. He will stay with me, no matter what. Now, I will be able to lead him, and the rest of the sheep will follow him. This lamb will one day be the best sheep of the flock—why, because the other day, I broke his leg. In order to break its will, I had to break its leg.” Often, for God to be able to use us, He must first break us. That is exactly what God did to Saul. He broke him, then He restored him. In that process, Saul discovered the true and living God who is Jesus Christ.

What more does the Lord have to do in your life for you to recognize Him?