

FOR HE'S A JOLLY GOOD FOLLOW

ACTS 9:1-19 FEBRUARY 5, 2020

You basketball fans are probably familiar with an iconic picture taken on December 17, 1997. In it you see Kobe Bryant and Michael Jordan standing shoulder to shoulder, in the middle of a Bulls/Lakers game. At 19 years old, it's Kobe's 2nd season, while Jordan is back from his first of three retirements from the NBA. In the picture you can see Jordan is talking and Kobe is listening. After the game, reporters asked the guys what had happened. With 7 minutes left in the game, during a free throw, Kobe had gone over and asked Jordan a question. One interviewer said, "Was he willing to give you any advice or any secrets?" Kobe replied that he did. When they asked Michael Jordan he said, "He wanted to know how, when I turn around on my jump shot, how I feel the defense."¹

It's a moment that many look back on as a passing of the torch between eras in NBA history. Kobe would, in many ways, pick up where Jordan left off. MJ would eventually, actually retire, but there would be many more games to play. And there would be *new* players to play them.

In some ways, that speaks to us of the continuing work of God through His Church. If you're a part of Christ's Body, you're not a spectator in the stands, at least you're not supposed to be, you're a player on the court. The ball is live and the clock is ticking. You have a position that you've been put in and a part to play. You're a member of a team but also given a lot of personal responsibility and personal *opportunity*. As we make our way down the court we have the chance to learn from those who've come before us. This is one of the great purposes of the book of Acts. Not that we're just *impressed* with it, but that we're instructed by it. That we take a look at those great disciples of the past and listen to their example, learning more about how to be successful in our own walks with the Lord. Not by simply trying to mimic their movements, any more than Kobe just tried to mirror MJ. But by learning from their lives and from these situations where God worked in them.

We want to be used. We want to serve the Lord. And He wants that too. So, how can we be encouraged or instructed in our spiritual game today? Well, we've got a great example tonight as we see an ordinary guy, living his ordinary life, being remarkably used by an extraordinary God. And his example of how to follow Jesus Christ is made all the more informative as he is contrasted with history's greatest *Anti-Christian* - Saul - who *thought* he was following God all along.

Acts 9:1a - Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

A lot was happening in this "meanwhile." The Church was being scattered out of Jerusalem. A great awakening had come to Samaria. The Gospel is being brought to the African continent. The Lord's sheep were headed out to the wider world. But, at the same time, The Devil raised up a wolf to try to destroy them. Saul was a ferocious enemy of the Church. He didn't breathe oxygen to survive, he breathed murder. One of the most enduring sound effects of all time is Darth Vader's *hoo-per*. That breathing is simultaneous with dread and villainy and danger. That's Saul.

Acts 9:1b-2 - He went to the high priest ² and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd7z1gRrB-g>

At this point, Christians were called ‘the Way.’ While this reminds us that there is one *exclusive* avenue by which mankind can be saved, it also highlights the continuous, forward-looking activity of the Christian life. It’s a *way*. It’s a *walk*. Jesus tells us to *follow* Him. We’re on the move. We’re headed to a definite destination and we’re to be actively engaged as we move along.

There’s a lot tucked into this verse and a half. First of all, we see that the disciples were *not* anti-Jew. They still had connection to the synagogues. It’s a horrible mistake when the church allows any attitude of anti-semitism to creep in. That’s happened in church history and it’s a grievous sin.

We also see Saul as a great, contrasting example to what following God really is all about. He’s on a mission, but his mission is to *make* captives. Christ sends us out to set captives free. His goal was to destroy his enemies. Our goal is to reconcile them to God. He went to the High Priest and received *epistles* that served as death warrants. Later, Saul would be transformed into the great epistle-writer himself, sending letters to help people grow and be encouraged and receive God’s grace.

But why Damascus? It’s over a hundred miles from Jerusalem, in a different country. We can make some guesses as to why providence led him there. For one thing, Damascus was an important city with many comings and goings and it’s estimated that there were 30 or 40 Jewish synagogues there.² Perhaps Saul thought it would be a ‘target’ of this Christian sect. There were some political reasons why they’d be allowed to continue their persecution in Damascus. Interestingly, with Saul’s attention focused on a city so far north, the much closer region of Samaria, where a fledgling group of disciples were just getting their start would be protected from his wrath. And, finally, there was a particular Christian in Damascus that God wanted to use like He had wanted to use Philip to preach to the Ethiopian Eunuch.

Acts 9:3 - ³ As he traveled and was nearing Damascus, a light from heaven suddenly flashed around him.

We’ll find out that the believers in Damascus knew Saul was on his way. No doubt they had been gathering for prayer, asking God to intervene. And yet, day after day, mile after mile, the Lord let him in closer and closer. On a practical level, this was necessary. Had Jesus knocked Saul down too early in his trip, he’d have just returned to Jerusalem. But, in His grace, the Lord draws His enemies in. Look at Judas. Look at Nebuchadnezzar.

Saul’s approach to Damascus also reminds us that God is more concerned with us relying on Him, trusting in His power, than feeling safe and secure. From our vantage point we know the Christians were bracing for impact, but all the while, Saul was being monitored. He was being followed. He was not *outside* of the Lord’s jurisdiction.

Acts 9:4 - ⁴ Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

These words are probably red in your Bible. The last time we saw Jesus speaking was back in chapter 1 where He had addressed His people at the Ascension. And now He’s back to have a talk with the man who hates Christ more than anyone else on the planet.

² Warren Wiersbe *Be Dynamic*

The Lord uses an interesting play on words here. The term used for “persecuting,” though most often translated this way, is sometimes translated as “pursue.” It can mean running after or following in haste. Saul *thought* he was following after God, following God’s word. In reality, he was traveling in the *opposite* direction. But now, the hunter had become the hunted.

Acts 9:5 - ⁵ “Who are You, Lord?” he said. “I am Jesus, the One you are persecuting,” He replied.

In *Avengers: Endgame*, the Incredible Hulk goes to a New York rooftop to retrieve an infinity stone. There, he encounters the Sorcerer Supreme, who, with one easy palm to the chest, knocks the strongest avenger out cold, surprising him and the audience. Then they have an important conversation.

Here the Lord Jesus reveals, once again, His personal attachment to His people. Of course Saul could do nothing to harm the GodMan, but Jesus sees any attack on disciples as an attack on Himself. You and I are not nameless pawns on His chessboard or drones in His army. We’re God’s children. We’re the Bride. We are dearly loved. When you suffer, the Lord knows and He cares.

Acts 9:6 - ⁶ “But get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

Jesus’ treatment of Saul is somewhat harsh. He’s physically knocked him down. He’s leveled a serious accusation against him. Here, the Lord let’s Saul know, “I’m the captain now.” But of course this is all much, much less than Saul deserves. The Lord shows patience and grace toward this wicked man. And thank God that’s true. Because, while you and I may not be guilty of the same *actions* that Saul was, our *sin* is just as evil. Just as disqualifying. Just as deserving of judgment and death. But a God of grace has intervened that we might be saved from ourselves and for eternity.

Acts 9:7 - ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the sound but seeing no one.

You know, God didn’t have anything to say to those other guys at the moment. That may seem strange, but it’s true. If you’ve ever tried to share the Gospel with more than 1 person at a time you’ve probably experienced this. In a group of 2 or 3, as you preach you’ll notice that maybe 1 of them is listening and is having a divine appointment while the others don’t seem to be hearing what you’re saying. If you’re preaching the Gospel and that happens, don’t worry about it. Just be sensitive to the people who *are* hearing what you have to say, focus your attention on them.

Acts 9:8-9 - ⁸ Then Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. So they took him by the hand and led him into Damascus. ⁹ He was unable to see for three days and did not eat or drink.

In a literal flash, the Church’s biggest, most dangerous enemy was neutralized. He who had dragged off men and women to suffer and die now had to be led by the hand like a little child, unable to fend for himself. It’s amazing what the Lord can do in a moment of time!

We see Saul was profoundly impacted by these events. He’s unable to eat or drink. His mind is reeling. His sin has been shown to him. Surely, thousands of passages of Scripture were coming to mind as he started to piece together that he’s been wrong about everything he’s done and thought for all these years.

Now we get to our forerunner, a great example, the disciple Ananias.

Acts 9:10 - ¹⁰ There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. And the Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias!” “Here I am, Lord!” he said.

We’re told later in Acts that Ananias was *known* to the Jews in Damascus synagogues. He was a good man. A man of integrity. It’s altogether possible that his name was already on the hit list in Saul’s pocket. The Lord calls him by name, just as He called Saul by name. I just want to keep reminding us that God *knows* us. He *knows* you, personally. Joe Biden created a memorable gaffe awhile back when asked who his potential VP candidates would be. He said he had 4 but then he couldn’t remember a single one of their names. He roughly described them but even that was a struggle. Not so with the Lord. He actually knows you. He actually loves you. You are His.

Ananias’ name means “Jehovah is gracious.” And he’s going to get a chance to live it out. We’re called “Christians” and every day we have the opportunity to live it out. To live out the life of Christ and the truth of Christ to the world around us. As with Ananias, that task is not for the faint of heart.

Acts 9:11 - ¹¹ “Get up and go to the street called Straight,” the Lord said to him, “to the house of Judas, and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, since he is praying there.

God not only knows your name, He knows your address. He knows where you’re from. He knows what you’re doing. He is attentive to us, keeping watch as we come and go.

Now, I can’t help but think of the Lord delivering this message with a twinkle in His eye. It’s almost playful. Because, He knows that Ananias knows exactly who Saul is. And yet, He says, “Ok, in this house a few streets over, there’s a guy named Saul and you’ll know him because he’s from Tarsus.” He doesn’t fill in Ananias yet about the Damascus road encounter. He just says, “Saul’s praying.” “... to who?” The Lord continues:

Acts 9:12 - ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and placing his hands on him so he can regain his sight.”

Have you ever been name checked like this? Or have you ever been volunteered to do something that you really hadn’t signed up for? It’s interesting: In God’s program there are times where the Lord gives an open invitation for certain tasks. Think Esther. “Hey, if *you* don’t help deliver Israel, someone else will.” Or the exiles returning to the land. “Who wants to go back and rebuild?” And then, other times, it’s like this, “Hey, it’s going to be *YOU*.” Saul was waiting for *this particular guy* to come and perform a miracle for him!

The application for us is that while we’re all sent into the world *generally* to do God’s work, there are certain, *imperative*, individual things God has prepared for each of us to do and it is our job to discover what they are and then to *do* them. And when He calls us we want to be ready to answer and obey. Still, Ananias had some questions.

Acts 9:13-14 - ¹³ “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard from many people about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has authority here from the chief priests to arrest all who call on Your name.”

Some commentators feel Ananias was being reluctant to obey. I don't think we need to go that far. More importantly, he becomes another good example for us of how faithful servants are not afraid to be *frank* with God. God doesn't want us to *pretend* when we pray. He knows what's going on in our hearts and He invites us to honestly communicate with Him. Look at the Psalms. Those people are speaking *frankly* with the Lord about their concerns and their confusions and their worries.

Acts 9:15-16 - ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go! For this man is My chosen instrument to take My name to Gentiles, kings, and the Israelites. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for My name!"

Saul will become the most prominent instrument in the rest of the book. But, as an instrument, his life's melody won't play like a delicate harp, it'll be beaten loudly like a drum. Ananias had a good work to do in this man's life, but a hard message to deliver.

Acts 9:17 - ¹⁷ So Ananias left and entered the house. Then he placed his hands on him and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road you were traveling, has sent me so that you can regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Ananias shows real courage here. He enters the home of someone who was, undoubtedly, a hater of Christians just as Saul had been. There, in the villain's lair, surround by members of the Sanhedrin's SS, he walks in, identifies himself as a Christian, and proceeds to show unconditional love to the man who came to town to kill him. He calls him 'brother' and does not recoil, but puts his hands on the weak and vulnerable Saul. If this were the book of Judges, this story would've had a much different ending, right? But this is Acts. This is the resurrection power of God working through ordinary people to seek and to save those who are lost. To give spiritual sight to the spiritually blind.

Ananias trusted his Lord. And, because of that, he will be the one to bring the most effective Christian of all time into the Kingdom. What an incredible opportunity!

Acts 9:18-19a - ¹⁸ At once something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. ¹⁹ And after taking some food, he regained his strength.

When Saul tells this story later in the book he fills in a few of the details that Luke skips in this chapter. Jesus said to him: "I will rescue you from the people and from the Gentiles. I now send you to them to open their eyes so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that by faith in Me they may receive forgiveness of sins and a share among those who are sanctified."

Saul was able to do that because he actually *lived* it. The message he would eventually preach wasn't theoretical. It was real. He went and did what had been done for him. He had been blind. He had needed rescue. And God had sent a messenger to come and open his eyes. Later, Paul would take up the torch and continue the work. Then Timothy and Titus. And countless more across the globe and through the decades coming all the way down to you and me. Like Ananias, we're ordinary Christians living ordinary lives. But also like Ananias, we've been commissioned and invited into the work of God. The play clock is running. Since we want to be effective and useful in our Lord's hands, we can learn from these examples. What do we see? We see prayer. Obedience. Faith and truth. We see a man who was willing to be led by the Spirit and willing to sacrifice for God's glory. We see compassion and mercy and forgiveness toward the most undeserving enemy of God.

And we see the world changed as a result. We are to go and do likewise as we continue the work, following along in the Way.