

*This character study / commentary into Apostle Paul is based mostly on Charles Swindoll's "Great Lives in God's Word" series on Paul and FF Bruce's "Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free." Main source materials are based on contents in these books unless otherwise noted.

Sunday March 19, 2023

Lesson 2: The Forgotten Heroes of Faith

Source Reference: Acts 9:7-19

The Pharisees in the time of Christ were often characterized as hypocrites, or portrayed negatively for their opposition to the ministry of Christ. This characterization is not necessarily fair given their roots and the events that had transpired leading into the time of Christ (see supplemental on the Pharisees for details). Prior to the time of Christ, the Pharisees (and to some extent, their counterpart party of the Sadducees) worked to combat the religious compromises and to the "Hellenization" of their religious practices that were influenced by society and by various sects. Their goal was to ensure the survival of the Jewish faith against the wave of religious compromises and the accompanying political threat to the Jewish existence.

By the time of the ministry of John the Baptist and that of Christ that followed, the Pharisees had seen many forms of threats – both in physical and political forms – to their practice as outlined in the Torah, and have had already endured many campaigns launched to defend their belief. In the decades prior leading into the Herodian era, the Pharisees had confronted many sects to the effect where quashing these sects have become a normal part of their routine. To the Pharisees, the ministry of John the Baptist and that of Christ represents merely another one of these sects that needed to be diffused (Acts 24:5; 14). The death of Christ on the cross should have ended this "sect," and purging His followers would have been viewed as a normal part of the duties of Pharisee leadership.

It is this mentality, this belief and conviction, that challenged Paul on that fateful day on the way to Damascus. Both Christ and his followers were merely another sect that needed to be purged. As a potential future member of the Sanhedrin, and possible high priest, it was his duty to help purge religious sects that blasphemes the God of his ancestors; so Paul believes. Jesus Christ, the leader of this "sect" is dead. This would have been another normal exercise, purging followers of religious sects. Suddenly, his encounter with the living God in the person of Jesus Christ, who, despite his strong conviction, belief, and understanding, is in fact, not dead. This personal encounter challenges everything Paul had believed to be true about the God of his ancestors – and the religious practice therein. Paul will now need some time to re-evaluate his entire belief system.

Events of Acts Chapter 9 – Portrait of a Forgotten Hero

After being blinded by Jesus, Paul was guided by the men he was traveling with into Damascus, and there he remained in this state for 3 days, during which, he did not eat or drink anything (Acts 9:7-9). During this period, God was working in the heart of another man named Ananias, a Christ follower who on that third day, very likely never expected to have his faith challenged in the manner told to us by Luke (Acts 9:10-19).

Imagine being Ananias that morning. Imagine encountering a vision to go seek out Saul, a man Ananias knew came to Damascus for the purpose of purging Christ followers (Acts 9:14); a man feared by Christ followers (Acts 9:13). Knowing Saul's intention for coming to Damascus, Christ followers can't find enough places to hide. Yet for Ananias, God told him to go seek out this very man everyone is hiding from. Being assured by God from that vision that Saul is God's chosen instrument to reach the Gentiles, Ananias stepped out in faith and obeyed God's command.

Ananias is one of the people in the Bible whom Swindoll identified as a forgotten heroes of faith. His name appeared in the Bible only in these few verses, after which, little is known about him that can be found in

any other writing from that period. However, his contribution cannot be underscored. Imagined what would have happened had he not stepped out in faith and obeyed.

Swindoll's Principle for all ages

Two people had to step out in faith in the events of Acts 9. Saul, a well-educated and intelligent individual who had mastered the Scriptures, but had strong conviction in a false narrative about the God of the Scripture, had to step out in faith to follow the message in his vision. Ananias, a little-known Christ follower who knew Saul was there to kill followers like himself, also had to step out in faith to follow the message in his vision. From the acts of these two individuals, Swindoll identified four principles as it relates to Christians stepping out in faith:

- *Surprises are always part of God's leading* – In Saul's case, the surprise was the vision in the form of a blinding light on a normal day of travel. In Ananias' case, it was also on a normal day, but with a subtler vision instructing him to do something that is both illogical and unreasonable. God's leading in our life to step out in faith will never be preceded by a warning shot to get ready. It will come on a normal day, and it will be a surprise.
- *Surprises always intensify our need for faith* – When we encounter the surprising element of God's leading, our faith must be engaged with our rational thought put on hold. Faith says to act on trust in the Lord when we don't fully understand everything (or anything). Ananias faith led him to follow the instructions in the vision against his rational thought, which warned him of the dangers and likely infused him with fear. Saul could have stubbornly held on to his belief and reject the vision; but he didn't. Note how Saul's vision only told him to go and (later) be told what to do, with nothing more.
- *Stepping out in Faith always brings clarity of God's plan* – When Saul submitted himself (Acts 9:6), he learned more about God's plan for his life through Ananias (Acts 9:17). This is how God works. We must step out in faith in order to gain clarity of God's plans.
- *Obedience always stimulates growth* – Ananias bore witness to the supernatural transformation in Saul when he witnessed something like scales falling from Saul's eyes (Acts 9:18). Against the backdrop of his personal fears approaching Saul, this experience would only strengthen his obedience to the Word of God.

Reflecting Upon the Word

Re-read Acts 9:1-19. Both Saul and Ananias experienced a supernatural encounter.

1. Compare and Contrast the two encounters. Why was it necessary for God to blind Saul in one instance, yet have seemingly a casual conversation with Ananias in the other?
2. In these separate visions, what was the biggest challenge to Saul? To Ananias? What was the faith lesson for each of them?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

Reflect on your personal journey both in your own time of conversion, and/or in the life of someone you know.

1. When you encounter Christ, did you have to re-evaluate certain things about life that you formally believed in? What were some of the things that you thought was true but have since had to reject?
2. Did God ever put you in a position to help in the salvation of someone you feared? Or someone whom you have deemed unqualified or underserving of His grace? Reflect on that experience in light of Swindoll's principles.