

When Saul Met Ananias

A man named Philip Goble wrote a one-man show thirty years ago called "The Rabbi from Tarsus." The apostle Paul is an older man in the show, in prison in Rome, looking back on his life and ministry. It is an excellent piece and I loved the scene that is based on the Scripture we read for today. Here's part of that scene, as told by Philip Goble who obviously uses poetic license to tell the story.

"Ananias!" "Yes, Lord." "I have something I want you to do." "Oh, yes, Lord. I'm Your servant. I'll do anything. What is it that you require?" "I have someone I want you to go minister to and pray with." "Gladly, Lord. I'll pray with anyone in Damascus. Who is he?" "The man named Saul who's come up here to arrest you and kill you." (Gulp) "Oh, him, Lord. (long pause) Well, Lord, I'm awfully busy. Does that have to be done today?" "Yes, today." "Well, Lord. You *know* why he's come here...to throw the whole lot of us messianic Jews in prison. He's one of the chasidim. What can I possibly tell him?" "Ananias." "Yes, Lord." "Just tell him I said to evangelize the whole world." "I beg your pardon." "Today."

- Let's talk about this man named Ananias and the role he played in what was arguably the most important conversion in church history. And let's start by acknowledging that Ananias could not have been picked out of a lineup anywhere in Christendom when he lived, and is not on anybody's top ten list now, either. Right? If you think about the people in the Bible whom you most admire, Ananias would not even come to mind, would he? It reminds me of a story I heard:
- A baby was born and his parents named him Odd. He went through school being teased mercilessly. Even when he went to college, people couldn't leave it alone; they had to comment on his weird name. He was so very sick of it, but knew there was nothing he could do. The last straw came, when, well into a successful career, he was presented with an award by the chamber of commerce. The presenter apparently believed he was funny, and proceeded to embarrass Odd with a roast-like monologue. Odd seethed, but again could do nothing. But finally, finally he had had enough. That night, he told his wife that he wanted to be buried with a blank gravestone. Nothing on it, no dates, no sentiments and most of all he did not want his name on the gravestone. He didn't want people making fun of him when he was gone. Time passed and so did Odd. Now, when people walk through that cemetery and see the blank gravestone, they say, "Hmm. That's odd . . ."
- We barely know the man's name, and very little else, who led the great Apostle Paul to the Lord. And yet, FF Bruce wrote, Ananias "has an honoured 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." Here are four truths I think we can take from this text.
- He was a reluctant servant. (vs. 13). Or maybe we should say, he was an honest servant! Can we be honest with God? Of course! If we can't be honest with God, we can't be honest. How many other reluctant servants were there in the Bible. Moses said he couldn't speak. Jeremiah said he was too young. Isaiah said he wasn't good enough. Gideon said he wasn't strong enough. Ananias was saying he wasn't brave enough. But here's the thing. Ananias wasn't just reluctant, or just "honest" about his feelings. He was willing to set that aside to follow God's commands.
- He was an obedient servant. (vs. 17) Jesus told the story in Matthew 21 of a man who had two sons and he told them to go and work in the vineyard. One son said "I won't go" but he later he changed his mind and he went; the other son said, "Yes sir, I will," but he didn't go. Jesus asked, "Which of the two did the will of his father?"
- He was a gracious servant. The first words perhaps spoken by a Christian to Saul since he heard the voice of Jesus started with this: "Brother Saul." (vs. 17) Ananias must have realized that if God said He had chosen Saul, then they were brothers. Isn't it the same for us? And the air we

breathe together is grace. And the gift we offer to each other more than any other should be grace. Freely you have received!

- He was a humble servant. He is never heard from again.
- He's like the guy who led Charles Spurgeon to faith. One of the most influential preachers of all time, and certainly of the 1800s, and this is how he came to know Jesus, as he told the story himself:
- I sometimes think I might have been in darkness and despair until now, had it not been for the goodness of God in sending a snowstorm one Sunday morning, while I was going to a certain place of worship. I turned down a side street, and came to a little Primitive Methodist Church. In that chapel there may have been a dozen or fifteen people. I had heard of the Primitive Methodists, how they sang so loudly that they made people's heads ache; but that did not matter to me. I wanted to know how I might be saved....The minister did not come that morning; he was snowed up, I suppose. At last a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach. Now it is well that preachers be instructed, but this man was really stupid. He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was—"LOOK UNTO ME, AND BE YE SAVED, ALL THE ENDS OF THE EARTH" (Isa. 45:22) He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimmer of hope for me in that text. The preacher began thus: "This is a very simple text indeed. It says 'Look.' Now lookin' don't take a deal of pain. It aint liftin' your foot or your finger; it is just 'Look.' Well, a man needn't go to College to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. A man needn't be worth a thousand a year to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look. Then the good man followed up his text in this way: "Look unto Me; I am sweatin' great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hangin' on the cross. Look unto Me, I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend to Heaven. Look unto Me; I am sitting at the Father's right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! look unto Me!" When he had managed to spin out about ten minutes or so, he was at the end of his tether. Then he looked at me under the gallery, and I daresay with so few present, he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart, he said, "Young man, you look very miserable." Well, I did, but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance before. However, it was a good blow, struck right home. He continued, "And you will always be miserable—miserable in life and miserable in death—if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved." Then lifting up his hands, he shouted, as only a Primitive Methodist could do, "Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but look and live!" I saw at once the way of salvation. I know not what else he said—I did not take much notice of it—I was so possessed with that one thought I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard that word, "Look!" what a charming word it seemed to me. Oh! I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them, of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to Him.
- We don't even know the man's name who led the prince of preachers, Charles Spurgeon, to the Lord. We don't know much more about Ananias!
- The only time Ananias is mentioned in Scripture again is in Acts 22:12, by Paul himself, as he shared his testimony, said, "And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there...."
- These, I believe, are two of the keys to understanding Ananias and maybe why God chose him for the job that he did. First, Ananias was a man of the Word. "A devout man according to the law" is not a reference to whether or not Ananias had a rap sheet. It meant that he was a student of the Old Testament writings. He was a student of the Bible, as much of it as was available. He was a man of the Book! Are you a man or woman of the book? Second, he was a man who loved people. And they loved him. Inside the church, they loved him, and that goes without saying. But also, he

was well spoken of by the Jews in Damascus. He had not alienated himself from the Jews, even though he was now a follower of Jesus. Are you a man or woman who is well spoken of by others?

- The servant of the Lord was used by God to greet Saul as a new brother, lay hands on him and heal his blindness, and confirm to him that God had chosen him and had a ministry that Saul was to fulfill: “The God of our fathers appointed you to know His will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from His mouth; for you will be a witness for Him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.” (Acts 22:14-15) Ananias was also used to baptize Saul and, we can only assume, be Saul’s introduction to the church in Damascus. The next thing we know, Saul is preaching Jesus in the synagogues (vs. 20), amazing the people because they knew who he was. Or who he used to be! Then we see this:
- Saul increased all the more in strength. (vs. 22) This had nothing to do with physical strength. A different word altogether, not the same one that is used in verse 19. This word in verse 22 always refers to strength in a biblical sense, moral and spiritual strength. Here are some other ways it is used in Scripture, all by Paul himself:
- Romans 4:20
- Ephesians 6:10
- Philippians 4:13
- 2 Timothy 2:1
- As we have said many times, you are responsible for the depth of your ministry. God is responsible for the breadth of your ministry. You can be an Ananias. In fact, that’s what most of us are. Like someone said once, “God must really love plain, simple believers. He made so MANY of us!” But the truth is, we have one responsibility that we share with the apostle Paul. We are to be found now, and all the days of our lives, “increasing all the more in strength.”