

Sunday September 6, 2020
 Lesson 1: Seeing Jesus
 Scripture: Acts 9: 1-20

Context:

We start a new series this fall with a focus on sacred spaces and how we encounter God. Each week the theme will focus on how God interacts with humanity to bring us holy encounters. We begin with “Seeing Jesus” and the Saul to Paul conversion story in the book of Acts.

The main character of the text is Saul, who by the end of the story has a new identity and name. At this point in the book of Acts, there have been several conversions, yet this one is more developed and has a twist. Saul is introduced before this chapter in the death of Stephen, an early church leader. He is a young man who helps participate in the violent act by holding the garments of those throwing the rocks at Stephen. The writer then moves on to other conversions, setting the stage for the transformation of one of the most notorious enemies of the church, this man named Saul.¹ His story will change history and the development of the church.

It is important to note this conversion story is not the only one for Saul. Saul has three accounts of conversion including Acts 22 and Acts 26.² Such an important story demands details added, even if given later on. In this one, we have the focus on Saul, the enemy of the church who seeks to imprison Christians. He moves from Jerusalem to Damascus to pursue those who are of the Way there.

During his journey, he is blinded and hears a voice demanding he account for his persecution of Christians. In true biblical fashion, the Lord knows Saul’s name and calls out for him several times.³ Saul responds, calling him “Lord” and listens to the instructions given to him. Oddly enough, those around him hear a voice, but see no one and there is no mention of them seeing the light. Conversion is a result of the objective act of God in a person’s life and is very personal, confusing family, friends, and bystanders, who cannot understand what has happened to the person converted.⁴ This seems to be the case for Saul.

Yet an often under appreciated character of the story is Ananias. Ananias is given a vision by God and asked to go another man’s house and heal Saul. Ananias knows the history of Saul and is reluctant. The Lord tells him to go and he does so even calling Saul brother as he puts his hands on him. As he does so, Saul is transformed and scales fall from his eyes. The church in Damascus takes Saul under their wings and he becomes a

¹ Willimon, William H. “Acts,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for First and Second Kings*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 74.

² *Ibid.*, 74.

³ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

preacher proclaiming the name of Jesus to all who will listen.

Application

The conversion of Saul has become one of my favorite stories in Acts for several reasons. Every time I read it, I discover something anew in the story. Each time, I walk away I realize how powerful our God must be as hearts can be changed at any moment and any time.

The first part of Saul's story to resonate with me is how his conversion transformed him from being an enemy of the church to an apostle charged with spreading the gospel across the ancient world. To a degree, I think most people can empathize with some parts of Saul's story. Each conversion to knowing our Lord is different, and yet at some time, we hopefully have had some sacred experience where we have felt God transforming us. It might happen when we are a child, a teenager, a young adult, or someone who has spent decades living and comes to an epiphany.

The second part of Saul's story to pay attention to is the transformation of his passion. Saul began his adult life as a persecutor of the church believing his calling was to destroy those who followed the Way. His passion for life was built upon destroying others for whatever reason and God was not having it. In his conversion, Saul went from imprisoning people to proselytizing people to follow our Lord. God transformed his passion into something to give life to others. How often we should be reminded of how our passion should always be meant to give life to others and bring good to this world.

The third part of Saul's story is the character Ananias. He is not discussed as much in the church today and yet his story is so powerful for our walk with Christ. Ananias enters the story, fulfills his mission from God, and then exits when his part has played out.

Ananias was given a daunting task. He was asked to heal a man who was known as an enemy of the church, someone who would have imprisoned him if he was not lying on a bed temporarily blinded. Yet Jesus called him to go and minister. Ananias tried to argue and then realized this was not a battle he needed to fight. God wanted him to go to someone who was an enemy and heal him.

Often in the church, we want to venerate certain people as heroes. We look at the pastor and think they are someone who is meant to fulfill every need in the church and they are meant to be the hero fixing everything. We elevate people, whether it the contemporary worship band or traditional choir and think they are the most important people in the worship space. Or you fill in the blank of the people who are the heroes or VIPs of your local congregation.

Ananias turns all those ideas on their head. In the modern church, we all know about Paul and how he became a leader in the church. Billions of people have read his letters and there are numerous references to Paul in our churches. He looks like the hero; the chief sidekick of Jesus.

Yet his story would not be here today if God had not called Ananias to step up to the plate and go and heal "his enemy." Ananias represents how ministry is about fulfilling the function of: "Here I am Lord." It is not about hero status or elevating people to the point we forget we all have a call from God. It is about doing the things God calls us to do even if it seems scary or challenging. God can work through our fears and God will work through us even if the path seems scary.

Do you have a conversion story of coming to know our Lord? What was it like for you and how is it similar/different than the story of Saul? How have you seen people change their passion from hatred to love? How has God done that with you? Who are the Ananias figures in your life? How can we show love to those we label enemy?

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