

Acts 9:1-31

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Date: 18 May 2025

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[0 : 00] Before we kick off, just as we were singing, praising God, I felt I had a picture that it was of a stream and a stream had been cutting its way through the landscape.

But often, streams and rivers, where they can continue to cut through the landscape for many, many years, suddenly they can change direction and go a completely different way.

And I just felt that there was something in that, that actually, that's sometimes how God deals with us in our lives. We can think that our way is cut, the stream is cut, the way we go is cut, but then suddenly God comes along and changes the direction of the stream.

And so, you know, I think it's important that we keep our hearts soft before God. And I especially think there may be folk here that actually God is starting to just say, I'm changing the direction of your life.

Embrace me in this, trust me, and go with me in this. Okay. Okay. Right. Okay, so we're continuing in the book of Acts, working our way through this incredible, incredible book that was written by Dr. Luke, explaining what God was doing in the early church.

[1 : 24] You know, we've been looking at miracles, we've been looking at lives transformed, the church growing, but we've also seen persecution coming in as well.

But even in that, God is using that to further his kingdom. And as we have drawn along, we've come across a man called Saul.

He's a young man, he's a religious, a very religious leader, Jewish leader. He oversaw the stoning of Stephen a few chapters earlier.

He's been imprisoning Christians in Jerusalem. He's even been looking to have them put to death because of this new belief system that he sees as being blasphemous to the Jewish religion that he has been brought up with.

And so, as we move on into our passage today, Acts chapter 9, we start off looking again at this man called Saul.

[2 : 40] So we're going to read through Acts chapter 9 and verses 1 through to 19.

Okay, so it's come up on the screen. Hopefully you can all read that, but it says this. So this is why I've given the background here. So it says, The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless.

They heard the sound, but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.

For three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything. In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision.

The Lord called to him in a vision. Ananias. Yes, Lord, he answered. The Lord told him, go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.

[4 : 48] In a vision, he has seen a man named Ananias. Ananias came and placed his hands on him to restore his sight. Lord, Ananias answered.

I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.

But the Lord said to Ananias, go, this man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. I missed apologies.

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, Brother Saul, the Lord, Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here, has sent me so you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

[6 : 01] Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. And after taking some food, he regained his strength.

This is an incredible passage of scripture. Saul, this man who is causing such persecution in the early church.

The church in Jerusalem has been scattered to a certain extent by what this man had been doing, this persecution.

And yet, as they had scattered, so they had taken the wonderful news of Jesus' resurrection of the gospel with them. And the church was growing despite the persecution.

But Saul has taken it upon himself to try to destroy the way as it has been called. And so he is heading to a major town, Damascus, to try to destroy the Christians there, to imprison and take them back to Jerusalem.

[7 : 15] And yet, Jesus appears to him. And this all changes. And so you think, okay, Sean's going to talk about Saul this morning and what God does in his life.

But actually, no, I'm going to talk about Ananias. A man who is often, very often, overlooked. Ananias is described as a disciple.

Nothing big and fancy. Just another disciple. A man who believed Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Just as any of us could be described.

A disciple. A disciple. And our passage this morning, in only a few verses, details the interaction between him and God.

And so I thought what we'd do is we'd look at it in two parts. We'd look at God's side of the conversation and Ananias' response to what God is calling him to.

[8 : 29] So we'll start off God's part. Now, clearly, God is able to do things of his own accord.

You know, he appeared, Jesus appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus. There were no other disciples involved. So God is clearly able to, and does sometimes, interact with men and women with no other humans involved.

Okay? But other times, and quite often, he chooses to use disciples, men and women, to work with him in seeing his kingdom developed.

He partners with us. Now, we are the very, very minor partners, and God is the very, very major partner, but he still partners with us.

And this is what's happening here with Ananias. Let's see what's going to happen. In the book of Hebrews, chapter 4, verse 15, we are told that Jesus understands our weaknesses.

[9 : 52] So God is well aware of any weaknesses Ananias may have. He's well aware of any weaknesses we may have.

So God, in communicating with Ananias, did certain things to help him. Let's start with this. God prepared the way.

In verse 12 of our passage, it says this. Saul had a vision. It revealed Ananias was coming. So Saul, you can imagine, he's blind.

He's fasting, and he's praying, and he gets a vision. And in it, God says to him, a man named Ananias is going to come. He's going to pray for you.

And then, I dare say the vision was a lot more than that. But you're going to, you know, we know what happens. But God is preparing the way. And he shares that with Ananias.

[10 : 58] He says, actually, I've told Saul, you're coming. It's not just any disciple. But God has said, Ananias is coming. In a way, God's already put all his eggs in one basket.

He said, Ananias is going to do this. And he has made it clear to Saul that's what's going to happen. So Ananias knew that he was chosen.

He was the man, if you like, that God had chosen to do this. So God had prepared the way for him. To further help Ananias to accept this mission, God added a number of reassurances.

So I said, God provided reassurances. So what do I mean by that? Well, in the process of receiving this, Ananias receiving this vision from God, God says a number of things.

He tells him what to do. So he says, I want you to go to Straight Street. Okay? Now, I'm sure everyone knows that Straight Street in Damascus was the street that went right through the middle of the town.

[12 : 07] Okay, you probably don't. I have to look it up. Fair enough. But actually, this street, it goes from east to west through the middle of Damascus. And it was a mile long. Okay?

So you can get a feeling that this wasn't a small place. You know, this wasn't the only house on Straight Street. So when God said, go to Straight Street, Ananias went, oh yeah, it must be Judas' house.

There was a mile of houses, potentially. Okay? So God is starting to pin this down. There's a particular, it's a street. It's Judas' house. Okay?

So there's some reassurances going here. You can see Ananias' brain going, okay, well, I'm going to go to Straight Street. If I can't find Judas' house, I can just walk away and leave it behind. No problem. So their population in Damascus was 10,000, roughly.

So it's a big town. And he's been told to go to Judas' house. He's also been told that Saul is there. Okay?

[13 : 12] So he's got a bit further information, some more reassurance. Because he could knock on the door and say, is Saul there? No? No? Never heard of Saul? Great, I'm leaving. He's told that Saul is praying.

He's told that Saul knows you're coming. And he's told that Saul is blind. Now, I've thought about this. If I was Ananias, and I finally was going to go and do this, I would be ticking them off.

Right? Okay, I'm in Straight Street. I'm going to ask people, where's Judas' house? Okay, that's Judas' house. Knock on the door. Is there a Saul here? Yes. Okay. What's he doing?

Well, actually, he's praying. Oh, that's good. He's not blind, is he? Yes, actually, he is. You know, you can see that God was providing a lot of reassurance here for Ananias.

It's, for those of you who know the story of Gideon, where he lays out the fleece two nights in a row. So, this is a big fleece for Ananias, because it's a big challenge.

[14 : 19] You know, Saul was here to kill Ananias. God says, go and tell him about Jesus. Go and baptise him. So, we've got a way prepared, reassurance.

And we've touched on this, but God is including Ananias in his plans. You know, this is, I want to make this very clear.

I've said it already, but I'll say it again. That God includes his children in his plans. God is advancing his kingdom, the church, through his people.

We're included in that. Okay, so Ananias is included. He's taken into God's plans. And then, God encouraged him.

Ananias is in a bit of a tricky situation. We'll look at him in a moment. You know, his response and everything. But God revealed some of Saul's future to encourage him.

[15 : 38] You know, God said, yes, he was Saul the persecutor. But actually, he's going to be Saul the apostle. Saul the evangelist. This man who has persecuted the church I'm going to use to incredibly reach the Gentiles.

To see my kingdom go further. And so, yeah, God is bringing Ananias into his plans. And encouraging him in it.

Okay, we'll move on quickly then. Ananias' response. So, as I mentioned, Saul has come to persecute and imprison. Ananias is very aware of this.

And he responds, you know, understandably with fear and anxiety. Fearful and anxious. I mean, just going to speak to a stranger can be pretty difficult, can't it?

But to go and speak to someone who wants to kill you, that's pretty tough. Ananias was probably thinking, chains, prison, being stoned.

[16 : 56] You know, he was fearful. But, this is the good bit. He was available and listening. You know, Ananias was clearly able to hear and distinguish God's voice and leading.

He's open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. His relationship with God is a good one. You know, he was able to discern this vision from God.

He was someone that God knew was up for the task. He was obedient. Having expressed his doubts and fears, still, Ananias is obedient.

He follows God's leading. He goes to Straight Street. He finds Judas' house, inquires of Saul, and he baptises him. And, in a sense, most of the rest of the book of Acts stems from this action, this response of Ananias as Saul comes to know Jesus.

And, he trusted. He trusted God. He trusted God. Okay. That's pretty much it about Ananias.

[18 : 20] Apart from in Acts 22, when Saul recalls this particular time to the Jews in Jerusalem, and he mentions Ananias.

Ananias is never heard of again. And yet what he did here, as I said, out of that stems Saul going to the nations.

A small part which triggered a huge response in the kingdom of God. So what's our response to this simple passage?

To God asking one of his children to do something. Our first response may be fear or anxiety. To be fair, it's often mine.

I can struggle with new situations. Speaking to strangers. Speaking about Jesus. Sharing a prophecy. I struggle with that often.

[19 : 24] But Ananias didn't submit to fear. Nor should I. Nor should we. So what do we learn from Ananias here?

He was available. Are we available for God? Are we willing to do as he tells us?

To go where he sends us? Even if it disrupts our lives. To be a disciple. To call Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

That's a calling to availability before him. God is looking for those who are available to partner with him. Are we listening?

Do we give him opportunity to speak to us? Maybe through God's word, the Bible. Through listening to sermons. To spending time in prayer.

[20 : 32] Even just waiting quietly before him. Are we taking time to listen? Or are our lives too filled with other things?

God is not silent. He wants to speak into our lives. Are we listening? To be bold.

Are we prepared to be bold for God? To step away from our fears and trust him?

Do our fears hold us back? Or are we asking him for boldness? God will be preparing the way. He goes before us.

And so are we trusting? Even in the big things. To go where he directs. To go with his plans, not ours. To trust him because he is trustworthy.

[21 : 42] That God can use us. Now I mentioned the rivers earlier on. Are you at a point where God's saying, do this? Are you willing to trust him?

To go where he sends you? And finally, obedience. Ananias was obedient. He was scared for his life.

But he was obedient. Are we willing to obey? To be directed by the Holy Spirit? Does God see us?

Does God see us? As a faithful servant? Is he able to look on us and then say to someone else, actually, that person is coming?

It's some tough asks in there. Okay.

[22 : 42] I'm going to just spend a few minutes praying. And then we're going to go carry on into a time of worship. But actually, I want to pray through some of this.

Do we want to be more of these things? Do you want to be more available? To be listening, to hear God speaking.

To be bold for him. To trust. To be obedient. Maybe those are things that you want more of in your life.

And we can ask and pray for those. Or maybe you're thinking, Ooh, I failed in that. Maybe there's things that we need to deal with in our lives where we've let God down.

Maybe a specific time that the Holy Spirit brings to mind that actually he wants you to deal with today. Maybe you've ignored his voice.

[23 : 41] You weren't available when you could have been. Maybe you are so caught up in fear that you can't do anything that God calls you to.

I'm going to ask Charlie if you're all right to just pray quietly. And I'm going to pray. I'm going to ask you to stand, please, if you're able. Lord, I thank you that you call ordinary men and women to partner with you.

That you get alongside us to see your kingdom come. To reclaim the gospel. To see lives transformed and to see you glorified.

And Lord, I pray that you would help us in this. To be available for you. To hear your voice clearly and to respond.

To be bold in what you call us to do. Trusting you completely and obedient in serving you. Lord, I know I've failed you so often in the past.

[25 : 08] And I just want to pray, Lord, that you would restore once again. Restore us to you. Where there are maybe chains of fear holding us back.

Lord, would you break them this morning. Release us into a new boldness. A new trust of you. Knowing that you are for us.

So therefore, who can be against us? I pray, Lord, where there are maybe the enemy keeps reminding us of our failures. Lord, that you would bring healing and restoration.

That we'd be able to move on knowing that we are forgiven. Saved by your grace. Washed clean.

A new beginning in Christ. Help us to be your servants. And see your kingdom come.

[26 : 09] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.