

Saul of Tarsus

Tyesha hates you,” Courtney said to her friend Alicia. “You’re pretty, with a great husband and kids, you have a wonderful job.”

The two women were talking about their coworker Tyesha, who had spread lies and ugliness about Alicia—Alicia was an ineffective, bossy manager, and she thought she was better than everyone else with her “Christianity.”

But when Alicia heard one of Tyesha’s children had been in the hospital with a serious illness and had recently come home, she wanted to do more than pray.

Tyesha was surprised when Alicia called to express her concern and asked if she could deliver a gift basket from work. Tyesha was pleased with the Edible Arrangement bouquet. But her mouth dropped and stayed opened as she opened all four gift cards—a \$100 grocery card, \$100 gas card, and \$50 each to two nearby restaurants.

“All of this couldn’t have come from our small unit,” Tyesha said candidly.

“We care about you and your daughter Makesha,” replied Alicia.

“I’ve been so hateful to you,” Tyesha said, looking down.

“You are dear to me because you are dear to Christ,” smiled Alicia. “Whatever pain you may have, the Lord wants to heal it and renew you.”

1. *What kinds of people have you met who seem like they would never be interested in Jesus? Why do you think that?*

2. *Do you know anyone who had a poor reputation before giving their life to Christ? How would you describe their Christian witness today?*

3. *What are some ways you can build closer relationships with people who are far from the Lord without being tempted into sin yourself?*

God Calls Ananias—and Ananias Protests

Acts 9:9-14, KJV

9 And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.

10 And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord.

11 And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth,

12 And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight.

13 Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem:

14 And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name.

Acts 9:9-14, NIV

⁹For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹The 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. ¹²In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

At a house in Damascus, for three days after encountering the risen Jesus on the road to the city, Saul remained blind; furthermore, he "did not eat or drink anything" (vs. 9). His encounter with Jesus had shaken him to the core; he now realized that he had not only sinned against the Church but against Jesus Himself, who Saul now

recognized as Lord (vs. 5). In modern terms, Saul literally could not function like a normal human being. And yet, as verse 11 tells us, Saul had still been actively seeking the Lord in prayer. He certainly had much to pray about now.

In verse 10, the scene shifted to elsewhere in Damascus, to the disciple Ananias. Ananias is one of those unsung heroes of faith—men and women who do what they have to do, without recognition or reward. We know practically nothing about Ananias, yet God used this faithful disciple to lead Saul into the Kingdom.

Just as he had to Saul, Jesus “called to [Ananias] in a vision.” Ananias too recognized the Lord, who then instructed Ananias to go to the house of a man named Judas, “on Straight Street”—which extended lengthwise through the city—where he would find Saul, praying (vs. 11). The Lord further explained that not only had Saul been prepared for Ananias’s arrival, but that he had been told the reason for his imminent coming: “In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight” (vs. 12).

Ananias did not hold back from expressing his reservations, telling the Lord of the reports he had heard about Saul “and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem” (vs. 13). Furthermore, Ananias knew Saul had come to Damascus “with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name” (vs. 14). Therefore, before going to meet this (now former) enemy of the Church, Ananias needed to be certain. Despite the fact that Jesus Himself had given the instructions, Ananias had little confidence that this mission would end well for him. Of course, the Lord already knew better.

4. *What was Saul’s condition at the beginning of this passage?*

5. *What did Jesus instruct Ananias to do?*

6. *What was Ananias’s initial response?*

God Responds—and Ananias Obeys

Acts 9:15-17, KJV

15 But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:

16 For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.

17 And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

Acts 9:15-17, NIV

¹⁵But 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. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

¹⁷Then 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 that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

While Ananias' reservations were understandable from a human perspective, the perfect, risen Lord would have none of it. He first gave Ananias an imperative—"Go!"—although He then gave Ananias a fuller explanation for his mission: "This man" who had so vigorously opposed the Church would become an even more vigorous advocate for Jesus. In Jesus' own words, Saul ("who was also called Paul," Acts 13:9) was "my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel" (vs. 15). At a time when the Church was largely still in its infancy and often underground, Jesus told Ananias in no uncertain terms that Saul would be taking His message throughout the Roman world, even to kings.

However, Jesus also made clear to Ananias that Saul's mission would not simply be filled with triumph after

triumph—as if in some way the rest of the early church’s suffering would somehow be for nothing. Indeed, Jesus would show Saul, maybe above all others in the early church, “how much he must suffer for my name” (vs. 16). That suffering would in fact commence almost immediately after Saul’s spiritual and physical restoration.

Ananias was convinced, and obedient; as verse 17 states, he “went to the house and entered it.” Perhaps there was still a bit of human reservation, but he did exactly as Jesus commanded. He went to Saul, and shared what Jesus had shown him: “Placing his hands on Saul, he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here. . . .’” This was confirmation of the Lord’s work in both of them—they had both been witnesses of the risen Jesus, giving the same orders to both. Saul, the enemy of the Church, was indeed now a “Brother.” Ananias then reiterated the rest of his mission: Jesus had “sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” This statement would be fulfilled immediately (see vss. 18-19). Saul would not just be healed—he would be filled with the Holy Spirit for the work that lay ahead of him.



A Roman arch on Straight Street in modern Damascus.

Photo: Bernard Gagnon

7. How did Jesus respond to Ananias’ reservations?

8. What did Jesus tell Ananias about Saul and his future mission?

9. How did Ananias respond to Jesus’ call?

Forgiving the Unforgiveable

In 2006 an unspeakable tragedy occurred at a one-room schoolhouse in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. An unstable man took a group of young Amish girls hostage, injuring five and killing five others with gunshots before taking his own life. School shootings have become all too common, but this particular event carried an added layer of tragedy because of the peaceful rural religious lifestyle of the Amish community.

This was not the only remarkable facet of the story, however. On the very day of the shooting, the grandfather of one of the murdered girls warned his relatives, "We must not think evil of this man." Similarly, an Amish father said, "He had a mother and a wife and a soul and now he's standing before a just God." Members of the Amish community comforted the shooter's widow, parents, and parents-in-law, attended his funeral, and invited his widow to the funeral of one of the victims. These acts of forgiveness and love drew international attention.

Forgiveness such as this doesn't occur in a vacuum. In a tragedy, most people react viscerally and instinctively. Imagine the years of practice these brothers and sisters had at forgiving daily offenses, large and small, to create such a profound community response of Christlike love!

When we are tempted to hold a grudge, maybe the story of this gentle Amish community could inspire us to live a life free from hatred and revenge. What kind of a world would it be if we all lived like that?

10. *Discuss an example of a time when you forgave someone (no names) for a great offense against you. How did you do it? What did you feel like afterward?*

11. *Who in your life right now needs to be shown love even though they have hurt you? Pray for them with a trusted partner.*

12. *What counsel would you give someone who is having difficulty forgiving another's offense and expressing love for them?*

Loving Like Jesus

An old saying goes, “You may be the only Bible some people read.” Since one of the most central messages the Bible communicates is love—God’s love for us and His desire that we love one another—how can we communicate that message to those who resist reading His Word?

► *What are some specific examples of how God has shown His love for you (what He has provided for you such as forgiveness, etc.). How can you show these things to others?*

Examples of how God has shown love for you:

Ways you can show that same kind of love to others:

KEY VERSE

And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

—Acts 9:17, KJV

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 that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” —Acts 9:17, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK’S LESSON

Week of May 29 through June 4

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

Mon. Isaiah 42:1-7—God’s Servant Will Establish Justice.

Tues. Galatians 2:16b-21—Live by Faith, Not Works.

Wed. Isaiah 49:1-13—My Servant Shall Restore Israel.

Thurs. Isaiah 49:14-23—God Will Not Forget You.

Fri. 1 Thessalonians 3:11-4:8—God Desires You Live in Purity.

Sat. Colossians 3:8-17—Clothe Yourselves with Love.

Sun. Isaiah 52:1-12—You Shall Be Redeemed.