

Let's open our Bibles tonight to Acts 9:10 as we continue our verse-by-verse study through this report from the Lord through His disciple, Luke, about the first thirty years or so of the early church and especially the spreading of the gospel. Jesus said to the disciples (right before He ascended) that He was going to send His Holy Spirit that He had promised them, that the Spirit that would lead them into all truth, that would give them great boldness, and He said, "You're going to start here in Jerusalem, and you're going to go to the ends of the earth" with the gospel.

Well, the way that the book of Acts lines up, Peter ministers a couple of times, the church grows so much in Jerusalem that they have to appoint some deacons. Stephen and Philip step forward. There is a scattering that takes place through Stephen's death. We're introduced to the apostle Paul (or he will be the apostle Paul) - Saul, if you will - and then we get the reports of the gospel not just being in Jerusalem but being in Samaria and in other places in Judea. We come tonight to the story, as we started last week, of Saul's conversion, his calling and his response. And then, in chapter 10, we're going to just put Paul away, so to speak. He's going to be several years out of the limelight, out of touch. In fact, we'll go over in detail all of the years that Paul spends where you don't see him, although you just skip a couple of chapters and go, "Well, there he is again." But if you realize how many years he was gone being prepared in secret, it makes not only a lot more sense but it'll maybe give you a lot of hope when the Lord's been preparing you for a while, and you think you should be ready and, "Why aren't we?" and "How come the Lord hasn't opened the door for me yet?" So, Paul's story is laid out in the Scriptures, and it's clear as to where he was and how long he was there. So we'll go with Peter to Cornelius' house, which is the gospel going to the Gentiles; and then pretty much that is handed over to Paul in the rest of the book. So, it's a long book, but it's short as far as laying it out or outlining it, if you will.

So last week we got to where Saul lost his religion. We talked to you last week about how the Lord found him lying in the dirt outside of the city of Damascus, on the road, as he was on a mission to arrest and kill those who were of "the Way" (as he called them), the believers. And the Lord stopped Saul. He had a meeting with Saul, and He asked him why he was persecuting Him. And he said, "Who are You,

Lord?" and He said, "I am Jesus." And Saul is led away, blinded by the light that's shone in his face, though he had never seen clearly, it seemed, spiritually. And so he is led to a house in Damascus, and we'll find him tonight; sits there for three days in the dark. No eating, no drinking water even. He's just ..... I can imagine what he's gone through. He was wrong, and now he knows it. He learns that he had gone in the wrong direction. He had been zealous, brutal, all in, completely wicked and wrong. And the voice of the Lord ringing in his ears, and for three days he gets to sit and evaluate himself in light of who God is. He's alive. The Lord didn't kill him. And it's a thrill. Right? So Saul has been converted. He submits to Jesus. He calls him "Lord." He says, "What do You want me to do? I'll do whatever You want." And those were the last words, "What would You have me to do, Lord?" "Arise, go to the city, we'll tell you what comes next." And so we left Saul in a house in Damascus, sitting in the dark.

And tonight we get to see some of the changes that take place in Saul's life. We're going to just go down to verse 16. We're slowing down a little because there's so much to learn, I think, from the narrative. The book of Acts has doctrine, but it's not doctrinal in many ways. It's narrative, so you learn from the stories themselves. And certainly one of the things we want to learn tonight, if the Lord will allow us, is to learn about hearing God's voice. Because a newly-saved guy, Saul, heard God's voice, and a guy who's been around for a long time, it seems, spiritually - Ananias - is able to hear God's voice. And Ananias doesn't want to do what God says, and Saul just wants to see if that really is going to come to pass. He's able to kind of filter through all of the noise. But one of the things that we learn from Saul is when people get saved, their life changes immediately, and you see Saul's attitude changing - his humility. I have to believe he was a horrible guy to hang around with when he was self-righteous and tough (what he was doing), and yet now he has a completely humble attitude. But we're going to learn from him tonight. The object lesson is to hear God's voice and follow it obediently, even when God directs you to do things that you think is maybe not the best thing for you. What do you do when God speaks to your heart and tells you to do something that you're pretty sure is a dumb move? You ever have that happen? Oh, it's just me then? I can just go home. Well, (Laughing) we're done. I've got nothin'. That's it. It happens a lot. God says something, and we decide what we'll obey. What things we agree with, we'll obey; the things we won't agree with, sometimes we'll just kind of find reasons not to.

So we're going to start tonight in verse 10. We, like I said, left Saul (there in verse 9) sitting where he was taken, if you will, by hand. And so he arose, and he went into the city and there Saul sat (verse 9) for three days, without sight; and neither did he eat nor did he drink. Verse 10, "Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, 'Ananias.' And he said, 'Here I am, Lord.' " I like the fact that God seems to have someone in every city. He's got agents. I mean, in this city, which was quite far away from Jerusalem, because of the persecution that had happened through Stephen's life, every believer that was in town (and they were pretty much all in town) ran off. And it does appear that this fellow, Ananias, ran here. It's a long way to go. It's not exactly in the most ideal place to grow spiritually. He probably had some others that were believers, but I doubt if there were many; it was a long way away, if you will. But here's ground zero. And you have to believe that Damascus knew Saul was coming. Someone had come to the synagogue and warned the rabbis, "The guy who defends our faith is coming to town." And I suspect that the preparation for the church had been to hide. "Find a place to go, get out of Dodge, wait till he leaves. He's the fiercest persecutor of the church. He's in a rage. He's coming our way." And then God speaks to a young disciple named Ananias to give him what will be a seemingly monumental task. Imagine putting yourself in his shoes. You're just a young believer. You've come to know Jesus. You were chased out of Jerusalem, where you had been growing and had some friends. You're in a pretty tough town where there are multiple synagogues (the Jewish presence was huge there). But the church would have been very small. And then God speaks to you, and it's the God that you have been seeking and wanting to hear from, and you want to know Him. And the Lord says to him, "Hey, Ananias," and he said, "Here I am."

And then "the Lord said to him" (in verse 11), "'Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying.'" Now Ananias is not a church leader. He's not an apostle. He's not an elder or a deacon. You can't find any title for him other than he's a believer that got out of town when things got tough, and he's having to believe in the Lord at a very difficult time - probably was saved in Jerusalem and then came here as a result of Stephen's death. Now God is going to raise him up for just a moment. He's going to pop into the story, he's going to do what God gives him to do, and then he's going to disappear, entirely, from the scene. His name is interesting because the word "Ananias" means whom God has graciously given; whom God has graciously given. That was certainly what Saul had pondered, sitting in the dark for the last three days, and what Ananias would learn watching God's

dealing with Saul. This is what God has graciously done. He would live up to his name. Paul, speaking to the Jerusalem mob (in chapter 22:12-13 of Acts), said, as he was giving his testimony, that there was a very devout young man named Ananias; that he was a man according to the law, that he had a good testimony with all of the Jews who were there at that time. And he's the one that came to him. So the reputation of Ananias, this brother in Christ, was a guy that had made peace with the synagogues; he was able to coexist at the time with them, if you will. And he had a good reputation. Ananias was a lover of God. He had a good report. He's the second Ananias we run into, isn't he? We ran into a fellow named Ananias in chapter 5. He didn't do so well. There is an Ananias in chapters 23 and 24, who is a priest who doesn't treat Paul very well. And then there's this faithful Ananias in the middle. So, Ananias gets direction from the Lord in a vision.

God speaks to men in the Bible in a lot of different ways - personal appearances, dreams, visions. If you're old, you get a dream; if you're young, you get a vision (Acts 2:17). I don't know. Through the words of others, through the circumstances that you face. By far, if you take all of the ways that God spoke to man in the Bible, you lay them out - you put them in categories, they are infinitesimal compared to the main way that God speaks to you and that is through His Word, by His Spirit. You can add all of the, "And the Lord appeared to me in a dream," and you go, "Ah, that's what I want." Well, you'll find very few of those. They're there. And to be honest with you, I would rather have that than to have to walk by faith. I would rather have an angel of the Lord sit at the foot of my bed and go, "Here's a letter from God," and then it says, "Dear Jack: Here's what I want you to do." Because I would do it. I could run with that. But when you get a blank paper, and the Lord says, "Just trust me," you go, "Ugh. I don't know." Now you're kind of stuck, right? "God, speak." Well, He does speak. He speaks in all kinds of different ways, but it is that still small voice that is the primary method that God uses to speak to you by His Spirit to your heart. So if you really want to know what God has to say to you, get in your Bible. Stay there. Don't forsake it. Don't put it aside. Don't minimize it if somehow, "Oh, I read it every day." You need to read it every day! You want to hear what God has to say. It's just the way it works. You want to hear from the Lord? Then sit down and read, and let God speak to you. He will. Like I said, I would rather have the spectacular. I think it is much easier on my faith to have God deliver a message. Yet God wants me to learn to hear His voice and realize His leading. It can be hard, though. When Paul wrote to the Hebrews in chapter 5:11-14 (towards the end of the chapter), he said, "I've got much more that I'd like to explain to you, but sometimes you get dull of

hearing. And at a time when you should now be teaching others, you find yourself at a need to be taught again all of the first principles of the oracles" (or of the Word) "of God. So you need milk, you're not ready for solid food. Because everyone who partakes only in milk" (this is his explanation) "is unskilled in" (God's Word or) "the word of righteousness. He's just a baby. Solid food belongs to those who, of full age, have their senses exercised so that they can discern between good and evil." Or if you will, as he continues in chapter 6 of Hebrews, it takes practice to learn to hear God's Word or God's voice. There are a lot of voices out there. Right? Turn on the radio, you got voices. Turn on the TV, you got voices. Walk around the church, people tell you what to do. And then you want to hear God, and through all of the noise, you want to be able to, by exercise, learn to hear what God has to say. And I found over the years that if I will just try to hear what the Lord has to say, and act upon when I believe God is speaking to me, that oftentimes I have heard His voice. And then there are those times when I just was a total buffoon. But I decided I would rather fail seeking to hear His voice and walk with Him than to do nothing. To do nothing is safe. You just say, "I've never made a mistake." Yeah, and you've never done anything either. There's something to be said for getting out there and falling down if that's what needs to happen. But Paul said to the Hebrews, "By reason of your use, you've been able to exercise your senses to discern between the two."

And here's a guy, young guy in the Lord, who obviously is able to hear what God has to say. He's been practicing listening. Right? He's able to say, "This is the Lord's voice. This is my flesh's voice. This is my neighbor's voice. This is CNN's voice. This is my ....." whatever it is. It doesn't matter. I have a voice that I can recognize that belongs to the Lord. And it takes time. He's open to the Holy Spirit. He's willing to serve the Lord. But initially, as we read this, he's pretty anxious about what God is saying to him. In fact, it makes him very uncomfortable. And here's his dilemma - his dilemma is he's aware of Saul's reputation. This is a murderous, brutal guy who believes in all of his heart like he's doing God a favor, and he is just slaughtering people's lives, and he's come to town with just that purpose. He's not doing three days at the Forum; he's taking you to prison or killing you if he needs to. That's his idea of serving his God. So here's Ananias. In his heart, he hears from the Lord in a vision. He's awake, and God somehow speaks to him, and he's aware that the Lord spoke, and then he goes, "What if I'm wrong? If I'm wrong, I'm dead." There's no margin for error here. Right? We just had a little problem with the plane. There's not a lot of margin for error. So he doesn't know what to do because he understands who Saul is. And, as he listens to what

God has to say, he's in a position where now he has to decide, "Is this the Lord, or am I just about to ruin my life here?" How accomplished have you become in hearing God's voice as you read? Are you able to say, "This is the Lord speaking to me"? Or do you find yourself just going, "I don't know"? I mean, here's a fellow that is in a position where he's willing to step out because God has spoken, but it isn't going to be easy.

Notice (in verse 11) that the Lord lays out for him very specific instructions. "Arise and go. Get up and go. And go to the street called Straight." If you go to Damascus today (and I don't suggest that you do), the main street that runs through this oldest city in the world - from east to west - is still called the Straight Street. Now I don't know if it was the same then, but they've kept the title, if you will. And notice that the word from the Lord to Ananias is very specific. "There's a street, there's an address, and there's a job for you to do." Very clear. "Here's a street, here's the house, and here's the guy that you're going to see." It does interest me that the two men to be used by God in bringing Saul along his way to the Lord have names that match other names that are known for their deceit. We know Judas. We know what he did. And we know this fellow Ananias. They both died in infamy. And yet here are two guys - who are named exactly the same - that God uses greatly. I wish we knew more about this Judas. I don't know anything about him in the Bible, this guy that owns this house. I don't know if he's a believer. I don't know if he is a Jew who was part of the leadership in the synagogue and was welcoming to Paul, and, "We couldn't wait to help you kill Christians," although I suspect he was probably a saint that somehow they found or made contact with. But I can't be sure.

What I do know (in verse 11) is that the Lord said to Ananias, with great expectancy and also with great excitement, "Behold," He says, "Saul's praying." The word "behold" is (I think we've told you in the gospels as well) one of those Greek words that means stop whatever you're doing and see how weird this is, or look at this unusual event. Right? Behold. Check this out. Don't miss this. And it sets the action apart from everything else as an unusual event. "He's praying." Now, if you read that, I would say (and have said to myself), "How come that's so odd?" I mean, he's a Pharisee above all the Pharisees, he belongs to the Sanhedrin. They make great show, and they're praying all the time. They'll stop in the middle of the street to pray. So you go, "Well, look at that guy. Now there's a guy really devoted to praying." Every faithful Jewish man would formally go pray several times a day. And yet the Lord said, "Look how different what Saul is doing here.

He is praying." And He actually points out the fact that Saul, sitting in a house that no one knows, is in prayer to the Lord. God tells us that Saul is reaching out to Him in prayer. This prayer was far different than all of the other prayers he'd prayed because this prayer comes from a man whose heart has been humbled before the Lord. This is the attitude of a man's heart that can touch God. Right? He's given up. He's fought as hard as he could. He was wrong, and whatever those three days did in taking a toll from him, they brought him to the end of himself. And now the prayer is sincere. And now it is heartfelt. And now this man has been humbled, and the prayer gets through. And God says so firsthand, "This is Saul praying. Check this out." He tells us beforehand, He tells us it mattered to Him, and He was listening.

I know from the Bible that the only prayer God hears from the unsaved is a cry to be saved. I hear people all the time "I've been praying" like God's going to listen. I don't find any support for you, when you are an enemy of God, that you can pray to God, and God will give you what you want. You can interpret your life any way that you like. But if you're going to the Bible for truth, there's no relationship between an unrepentant sinner and God; and then there's no access into His throne, and there're sins that separate you from God, and He can't hear you because of that. I mean, the Bible's replete with clear explanation as to where you stand. So, pretty good indicator that Saul had seriously come to the Lord and cried out, "Lord, save me." It was Peter, who wrote in chapter 3:12 of his first epistle, "For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil." So there's no way you can, from a theological point of view, believe that someone in the world that isn't saved can pray and somehow God is listening. That's not so. God's listening, but He's not going to respond because the only thing that He wants to do with you is to bring you closer to the Lord. When David wrote in Psalm 66:18, "If I regard iniquity in my heart" (and the word means to allow it to continue - regard is to give it a place, if you will), "the Lord will not hear," that's even true for the believer, let alone the unbeliever. And then David goes on in that psalm, and he said (verses 19-20), "But certainly God has heard me; He has attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, who has not turned away my prayer, nor His mercy from me!"

So, here's a man praying who is really now intent on having God hear him. This isn't like the duty and obligation. This is a man who can't do anything else. Right? Here's a guy that just wants God in his life in the worst way. You know the difference, I think. I think all of us have prayed whatever it is that we think we

need, and then we have real needs, then, "God, I'm serious right now." We pray differently, don't we? You hear people in panic praying, and they pray differently than the guy who thinks everything's fine. "Should we pray?" "All right. We'll pray. Lord, thanks for today. Amen." Not really so heartfelt, if you will. But the Lord points Saul out. He's praying with a pure heart, though he is not sure he will be heard, he has no promises to hang on to - unless he remembers those things that he would have learned. But he is crying out in earnest, and God hears him because God is filled with mercy and filled with grace.

I was at a dedication a couple of years ago for a political post for a guy, and they asked one of the pastors who was there to come and do the benediction. And he came with a card where his prayer was written out. Because there were a lot of folks in suits and looked pretty formal, I guess he thought he really had to come through. So he got up, and he, "Oh, heavenly Father and great Lord of all," and it sounded horrible.....to me. I'm not questioning the guy's heart. I have no idea. But I think if you go to read your prayer, there's something weird, isn't there? "All right, I'd like to pray....." I don't come to you and go, "Hey, how are you?" (Pastor Jack looks down like he's reading from a paper) "I am also fine, thank you. What have you been up to? Oh, that is interesting." There's not going to be much relationship, you know? Not so sincere.

Here's Saul, crying out in sincerity. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:7), "Some people think that they're going to be heard in heaven for their much praying or their vain repetition, and they think they're going to be heard for their many words." And He said, "That doesn't work that way." But here's a man that gets through. You want to know about how God answers prayer? Be sincere in how you pray. Be hungry to hear. Be hungry to get close. Say what's on your heart. Believe what God has to say. Come broken before the Lord. This is how your prayers get through. Saul has been saved three days, and he's movin' heaven and getting in and breaking through. He was praying with an open heart. It was a different prayer. It was humble, it was hopeful. There was no self-confidence in his prayer. It was from a life that he repented of and wanted God to change. He spent a lot of time telling people, "Hey, you think you're somebody, look at who I am." He was proud of himself. He was a Pharisee. Jesus said in Luke 18, about the Pharisee - remember, two of them going up to the Temple to pray, a tax collector and a Pharisee - and the Pharisee stood up, and he said this to the Lord, "I thank You that I'm not like that guy." (Pastor Jack points) "I'm not an extortioner, I'm not unjust, I'm not an adulterer. I'm not like that tax collector. I



fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I possess." And he thought that he brought to the Lord a resume that would move heaven's doors. And the Lord said, "And meanwhile, in the back of the church, stands a tax collector. He won't look up to the altar, he won't look up to the place of sacrifice. He's ashamed of himself. He smites himself in his breast. He says, 'Lord, forgive me. I'm a sinner. Be merciful to me.' " And Jesus said, "I'm listening to that guy." He was sincere. He broke through. Saul breaks through. It's amazing. And we can as well. God wants to hear from us, but His heart is moved by the cries of repentance and the sincerity of the cries of the heart. And even sitting in the dark, not able to see, under great duress, Saul is heard. So, "I want you to go there because, behold, Saul is praying."

Verse 12, " 'And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight.' " As he prayed, God appeared to Saul in a vision as well. Again, a vision that is internal because, after all, he's blind. Right? "Well, what kind of vision? What's a vision? Do you see with your eyes?" Nope. You don't, apparently. He was blind. So at least this vision was internal. And he was told to expect a man named Ananias (very specific) who was going to come pray for him, lay on his hands to pray, and restore his sight. I love the lesson of the story that tells me that when God is at work, He works all sides of the fence. "Oh, Lord, You've moved my heart. I don't know if You've moved theirs." Well, if the Lord's into it, He moves everything, doesn't He? It isn't just you that He's moving. He moves everything around you. I had a young man tell me that God had shown him who he was to marry, and so he went to this girl, and he goes, "God showed me I'm to marry you," and she freaked out. And she came and saw me, and she said, "This is what the guy said. What do I do?" And I said, "Oh, that would freak me out." She said, "Me, too!" She said, "What should I tell him?" I said, "Do this. Say, 'Have God give me a call. Have Him tell me.' Because if that's the Lord, then it'll work out on all sides." I had another fellow, years ago, come for counseling, and he came into my office with a straight face, looked me right in the eye, and said, "The Lord told me to leave my wife." I said, "Really? The LORD. Capital L." He said, "Yes. And," he said, "not only that. He showed me who to marry. I found the right woman." I didn't give him as good of advice. But saying "The Lord told me" doesn't make it so. Right? "The Lord told me." When people come to say things to me, and they want to convince me that what they want to do is right, and they throw in the words, "The Lord told me to do it," I'm done talkin'. Because either He did, or you're lying. If you're lying, you can deal with Him. If He did, we'll see it'll all work out. "The Lord told me." Well, the Lord told Saul,

"There's a guy comin'." And, again, wouldn't you love the Lord to sometimes speak to you and just be that clear with you and so straightforward? We need to be sure. And I'll say this to you - you need to be sure that when you believe God is speaking to you that you filter whatever He has said to you (supposedly) through His Word. The good thing is we have a clearinghouse. Right? Paul said to the Hebrews, "Work at it. Test it out." Okay, but run it through the Scriptures. The guy that says to me, "The Lord told me to leave my wife for this other woman that I've found, so thank God I found her before it's too late," is being deceived. And I gave him a whole lot of Scriptures, and I don't believe he came back. But there's a dispute between his claims and God's Word. So, look, God never works through selfishness. God doesn't work through spite. God doesn't move for your glory. God doesn't move you out of revenge. He isn't ever motivating you to get even. If you say to yourself, "Is what I believe God is saying to me consistent with His nature and His revealed will?" you'll make a lot less mistakes.

Now, there's no doctrine here, right? So Saul doesn't have that benefit of asking those questions. He just hears there's a guy coming named Ananias. So here's all Saul has to do - he has to wait until he shows up. "That was the Lord. There he is." Pretty easy. If he doesn't show up, "I guess that wasn't the Lord. Must have been the burrito I had for dinner. Speakin' to me now." Very different. So, all Saul could do was wait. But Ananias has a different problem. His problem is he's afraid to do what he wants. He can go or not go. He can decide, "This guy's way too dangerous, and I'll just send one of my buddies" or call it in to the church. If he goes to see this man, and he knocks on the door, and there's a Judas on Straight Street, and there's a Saul there, I think he could feel a little better about things. He could yell across the street so he could still run. "Hey, is there a Saul in there? Okay. What's your name?" "Judas." "Oh. Now I'm kinda stuck." He can check out the vision. He can test, if you will, the waters or see what the Lord is doing. So they both have to be willing to act upon what God has said. Ananias is, at this point, in a much more difficult place.

Well, what would you do if you were Ananias, and this is what the Lord said to you? We're told (in verse 13), "Then Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.' " You want to know how corrupt the Jewish faith was, there shouldn't be chief priests (plural), but there were. There should only be one chief priest, but that had gone away a long time earlier. So Ananias hears from the Lord. He believes God has

spoken to him. He's practiced in hearing God speak. He's open to the Spirit. He's a submissive guy. Faithful. He's been chosen by the Lord. But his immediate reaction is a complaint or an objection based solely on what he knew and had heard about Saul. Hadn't met him personally, it doesn't sound like. Hadn't had any experience with him. But he'd heard from other saints - maybe those fleeing from Jerusalem, "There's a guy coming to kill everybody. We've got to go!" He could have been involved in housing or moving folks out, now that he heard that he was coming. "Lord, did You know that he has permission from the high priest to come here and arrest us if we just call upon Your name? Lord, he's killed people! If he's blind like You say he is, and he's praying, let's just leave him like that. Maybe it'll slow him down a little bit. In fact, Lord, if I could pray that he die today, that would be my prayer. If you could just take him out because he's destroying the church. Blind, good! We're halfway home! What if I'm on his hit list? Perhaps he's comin' to my house today. Maybe someone told him where I live. And now you want me to go find him? I've spent the last several weeks making preparations to hide my family, to relocate some of my family members. I don't want him to know where I'm at or who I am. There're a lot of Ananiases that probably he wouldn't confuse them with me. Obviously, Lord, You can see how foolish Your suggestion is." But then he says this, "Lord." It's so great. "Lord" means that "You're the boss, and I'm not." Applesauce. Right? You're the boss, applesauce. "You're the boss." It's a word that means authority over. You can't have two lords over one life. You can only have one.

So, I find myself sometimes balking when God directs me to do something I think is not as good of an idea as the one I've come up with. I've even told the Lord that. "Lord, really? Because it doesn't seem like it'd be working." I know it's wrong. But here's a man that knows the Lord, but he believes that his supposed knowledge of things is greater or clearer than God's Word to him about those things. That's why he's arguing. If he didn't believe that, he wouldn't be saying what he said. He'd say, "All right, Lord. Good idea." But he doesn't say that. Who knows better than he does? At least we think, sometimes, we do. And it seems to me that when it comes to following God's Word, even the obvious stuff, that we will do it and follow it when we agree with it, and we will ignore it or reason it doesn't apply to us when it comes to other situations. I have to forgive someone that I'm angry with, and I find reasons that I don't need to do it. I need to be available to serve, and yet I'm way too busy for that so I make excuse. I need to be obedient to God's Word, but, you know, I've got an idea. I should be praying, but I'm not; I'm just telling God what He should be doing for me. And I go along, I'm supposed to be dying to

myself, I'm supposed to be denying the flesh, I'm supposed to be putting others first. Those are things we all know we're supposed to do. Forget about, "Has the Lord spoken about your wife and another woman"? Just forgiveness, mercy, prayer. And we don't do it, or we just nominally do so, and we wonder why our walk with ..... "How come I'm not hearing from the Lord?" And we're not very vested in our walk with Him at all. It is exactly, in these kinds of situations, that we find ourselves inconsistently using the word "Lord" in our vocabularies.

Ananias was far from, at least in his heart, being willing to go make a house call on the murderer, Saul. "I don't want to do any follow up. What if this is a set up? I wish the Lord knew everything I know. Then He wouldn't be sending me." You see yourself there? I see some of you there. No. I don't. (Laughing) I've got my own problems. I'm not gonna worry about yours. My experience is that we are extremely quick to seek to follow the Lord's word when it comes to applying it to somebody else's life. "Brother, you know what you should be doing....." We are quick to quote Bible and verse to people that aren't living up to our expectations. But the minute it applies to us, oh man, then we're not so happy, we're not so willing to apply it to ourselves. And the same truth can be applied when you're facing critical decisions in life, and you almost know that God wants you to go in one direction, but you want to go in the other. Whether it's career or relationship, one profits little now but eternally much better; one profits a lot here but doesn't have, necessarily, great benefit spiritually. And we want to always opt for, "Well, I'm gettin' a raise and six more weeks off for vacation. Thank You, God, for directing me." And the Lord said, "But I want you to go to the mission field." And, "Oh, no. Thank You, Lord, for bein' over here." Because somehow I only want to hear from God when it suits my purposes. But that's not how you get led by the Lord. You try to be open to His leading, even when the choices that are set before you seem to be less profitable for now. And the dilemma arises when we have a variety of reasonable explanations for disobedience. "I don't want to walk by faith. I don't want to walk with God." I want to appeal to you to say, "Well, you see why I've chosen this, don't you?" and you go, "Well, that makes sense to me." And everybody's wrong. That's the dilemma that Ananias is in. "Go pray for a guy in a house in the middle of town who is here to kill you." And Ananias does what we would do, "Lord, bad idea, Lord. Maybe I should fill you in, Lord. Do you have a minute, Lord? I'd like to tell you what I know, Lord." I don't think he expected to hear what the Lord said in verse 15. He just said, " 'Go.' " ("I'm not explaining anything to you. You just go.") " 'He is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many

things he must suffer for My name's sake.' " "You just go." From a very simple direction to a more forceful command, God graciously at least lets him in a little bit on what He plans to do with Saul. But the bottom line is God says to Ananias, "This isn't open to discussion. You want to obey Me? You just go. You want to serve Me? You just go." The only counsel available when you balk at walking in God's will is the same - go. "Well, I'm gonna need counseling and a patient working out of things over time." "No! Just go. Just go. Just go." "Well, I don't know. I sure don't like Your tone, Lord. You don't see the wisdom in what I'm telling You? You don't know how I'm feeling? He murders Christians." "Yeah, I know. Go. Just go." "Well, Lord. I have better ideas. I think if You just bear with me." "Yeah, go." It's the end of the discussion, isn't it? Bob Newhart (a comedian from years ago) used to do a little bit about counseling, and he said that he would counsel anybody and get them out of any problem for \$5 in 5 minutes. And he sat at a desk, and somebody put \$5 in a little bucket, and he said, "What's wrong with you?" and he said, "I'm really worried all the time." And Newhart did this, "All right. Knock it off. Next." (Laughing) "Well, wait. That's no counseling." "No. That's good counsel. Just don't do that anymore." Same thing with us. God wants you to do something, just do it. Sometimes it just comes down to just responding. Right?

So, in His gracious explanation, God talks about Saul's future. Now Saul doesn't know this yet, but we're told early on. "He's a vessel of Mine. I've got plans for him. I'm going to send him to the Gentiles. He's going to stand before kings and even be able to reach out to his own people, the Jews." Look, God had been preparing Saul for years. For years. And He was going to prepare him for many years more. I mean, look at Saul's life. He has a unique background. He's going to be very handy in the work of God. He was born in a Jewish home. He grew up knowing the Bible, the Scriptures, since he was a young kid. He was raised in a Roman city, so he was good about Gentile life, if you will, and it exposed him to the customs and to the language of the Gentiles. He was multilingual. He could cross barriers. He knew about different cultures. He was taught in the school in Jerusalem by Gamaliel, the foremost Jewish rabbi teacher on the planet. He was prepared to deal with the Pharisees and all the intricacies of their religious practices. He had an inside relationship and working knowledge of the way that they operated. This guy knew all of it. Even his wicked opposition to God's work in persecuting others (the way that he'd done) would make him the most tender-hearted guy towards the hurting that you'll find in the Bible. He was willing to take it on the chin and suffer for the sake of the church and figured he'd never really make up for what he'd taken away. So he comes to his work with a willingness to

just kind of lay his life down, even to suffer for their sake for God's glory in the days to come. He becomes this fearless servant, indebted for life, filled with information, language, customs, skill. "Yeah, I got this guy now. I'm going to use him." And God had prepared him just as He prepares you for the work He's got prepared for you.

And I know that as you walk with God, and you get to where you (at least maybe not permanently but) move along in the things God's given you, looking back you can oftentimes see that. I went to school to be a doctor. I did a lot of studying. And then when I obviously couldn't finish, I wondered why the Lord would waste all my time in college. But I'll tell you what. As a pastor, I get to read a lot and study, and it comes real easy to me. I can read 200-page books in an hour and remember 90% of it. And I just kind of ..... I don't know. Sometimes that's irritating, you know, you get to the end of a good book. But, on the other hand, it's prepared me to do what I'm doing. I wouldn't have voted for it. I wouldn't have picked it, probably. Had other ideas.

But Saul was prepared for this broad ministry. God had prepared Philip and Stephen and Peter for other things far greater. I look at God's choice, and I think Saul (Paul) should have gone to the Jews, and Peter (who was wacky) should have gone to the Gentiles. "You mixed 'em up, Lord." But the Lord didn't mix them up. He knew exactly what He was doing. And like I said to you, before Paul gets ready to really minister as a pastor, and then as a missionary, years will pass. And like I said, we'll point those out to you next week, and it's important to see the time span involved. But there's something about being prepared, and this is his first day. This is the day that the Lord is going to lay out for him what's going to happen. But, in the excitement of your new life in Christ, sometimes we like to run ahead, but we've got no message. I wanted to preach after I was saved eight days. I went to the home Bible study I got saved in, and I said to the teacher, "Hey, can I share a couple things?" And he said, "No." "What do you mean, no? Man, I'm like bubblin' over. I've got stuff!" He said "Keep it to yourself" is what he said to me. I was saved seven days. So, I guess I wasn't ready to pastor the church in three months. So you need to have a place where the message of God comes firsthand to you, and you learn it and walk with it, and then you can share it. I mentioned Sunday David, but David met Goliath after having to come to the LORD and know His power personally. He was able to say, facing a 10-foot guy, "Yeah, the LORD's been with me when I fought a bear and fought a lion." And I'm thinkin', "Yeah, well if you fought a lion and a bear, and the LORD was with you, I'm sure you could take

this guy out." But he came prepared. There's no shortcut to spiritual maturity, but God, along the way, prepares you for what He's got prepared for you. Ephesians 2:10 says, "You are God's *poiema*." The word "workmanship" is usually the way it's translated, but it's the word "poem." God has orchestrated your life so that you sound and you rhyme, the good works that God has prepared before that you should walk in. God has a way of preparing you. Paul would say later to the Philippians (in chapter 2:12), "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." What does that mean? Work it out for yourself. It's learning that "God works in you to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). You've got to find what God is doing, and you have to have a personal conviction about it, or else you're probably going to slip and fall. It was Paul who said to Timothy (in his last letter he ever wrote to him-2 Timothy 2:19-21), he said, " 'God knows who are His,' " and, " 'If you call upon the name of the Lord, then you should depart from iniquity.' " And then he talked about in a big house there are lots of vessels that are gold and silver, that are honorable; and then there are vessels of wood and all, that are not so honorable, clay. He said this, "Anyone who cleanses himself from the latter will be a vessel of honor that God can use, so you'll be prepared by the Master for every good work." So we leave Saul sitting in a dark spot, but God's beginning to bring him out to understand what He has prepared him for. But understand - much of what God has done has already taken place, if you will, in Saul's life. "He's a chosen vessel for Me to bear My name before the Gentiles, before kings, and before the children of Israel." And, looking back, God had been preparing him all of his life.

And the Lord finishes speaking to Ananias, and He said, " 'I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.' " "I'm going to show him what it's going to cost him to serve Me." One of the things you learn from Paul in the years that follow is he never balked at the cost for serving God. Somehow, what he did in these years that we just kind of blow through (because we don't have much information) - the horrible things he did - left him willing to count the cost and never feel like he was out of debt to God's grace. Everywhere you turn, "By the grace of God," he said to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 15:10), "I am what I am." It's the old Popeye line. "I yam what I yam and dats what I am!" "His grace towards me wasn't in vain." He said to the Ephesians (3:8), "I'm the least of all of the saints, yet God's mercy to me has been given that I could preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." So, Paul was going to hear the cost and the tradeoff. And if you read through 2 Corinthians 11 where Paul talks about how he'd been beaten five times by the Jews, forty stripes minus one, how he'd

been beaten with rods, and how he'd been in peril and in the water, and in peril of robbers and his own countrymen, and in the city and in the country, and the Gentiles, and bobbing around in the ocean for a couple of days, he laid out all of the stuff he went through, and then he said, "Besides that, you've just got every day the deep concern I have for the church. That's always on my mind." I mean, he went through a lot. Only to say this to you - if you're going to serve the Lord, you're going to go through stuff. It's going to cost you. It's not a cheap road to take. The Lord will use you, and God has great things to do in your life and through you. But that doesn't mean that it's going to be easy. If Moses could say to the LORD - the most humble man and the man who found himself so submitted to the LORD - if he could say, "Kill me, I don't want to deal with these people anymore," you've got to believe that if you're going to serve the Lord, you're going to have the same kind of issues.

We took our first tour with our group from church to the "Footsteps of Paul" this last year. Of all of the places that we visited, for me the most amazing place was Corinth. And it wasn't the prettiest. In fact, it is pretty empty. There are some things there. But as I was reading through Acts 17 and 18, Paul had to go alone, away from his guys that he traveled with for months. And they said they'd catch up with him. And he went to Athens, and he tried to do the sermon of the unknown god, and, "Hey, there's an altar over here to an unknown god. That's the guy I know, and I want to talk to you about Him." And you'd think, "Oh, great message Paul." And nobody responds. They don't care. They kind of looked at Paul like, "We do this every day. We sit around and talk about stuff." And Paul couldn't find any traction with them, and he leaves Athens, and he's still by himself, and he goes to Corinth, and he's so discouraged that he doesn't share with anybody. He just kind of sits and gives up. And the Lord has to actually come to him in Corinth and say, "Hey, hang in there. Nobody's going to try to kill you here. I've got a lot of fruit in the city. You're going to be just fine." And even that didn't move him until his friends showed up and encouraged him, and then he said, "Well, maybe I've got to go back to them." He felt like he had failed at, literally, every place that he stopped till he got to Corinth, and then he was just ready to give up. And this is a guy that you hold up there like one of the greatest saints in the New Testament. So, it happens to everyone. But he needed a personal visit from the Lord just to encourage him. If you're going to serve the Lord, there's a cost. Just a cost. You want to quit, you can quit. But the cost comes along with the fruit. The Bible says, in 2 Chronicles 16:9, that "the eyes of the LORD go to and fro throughout the



whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him."

Here're two pictures of guys, just in seven verses. We have a quiet, retiring, godly man named Ananias who is living in obscurity for the Lord. We don't know what he's doing. He's not making the front page of the news. He doesn't show up in our Bible. There's no book named after him. He shows up for this one task, and then he finds himself disappearing. And then you have Saul, who has the worst back story imaginable. His old life could fill a library, and none of it would be any good. And yet God desired to use both of them - as they heard His voice, as they responded to what He had to say. I think you can learn from Ananias that you need never be fearful to obey the Lord, even when you would argue that God's counsel doesn't look as promising as your perspective. Just do what He says. Because in so doing, you will confidently find His best. God's work is diverse enough to where you can't put Him in a box. But He'll speak to you. On the road, God had miraculously appeared to Saul. In Judas' house, God sends Ananias. You would say, "Why don't You just appear to him a second time and be done with this? And don't put Ananias in such difficulty." Because God wants Ananias to grow, to hear His voice. Out on the road, God had spoken directly to Saul. But here, God will quietly bring a disciple who's going to be very hesitant to say much of anything. The ordinary is as miraculous as the extraordinary. I guess that's what I'm saying. And God seems to work in both. So you can't underestimate the value of just you doing what the Lord says. The hard thing is hearing from Him and practicing that on a regular basis. You can be like Ananias and say "Lord" while you argue or "Lord" while you disobey or "Lord" while you give reasonable arguments as to where it doesn't apply to you. And you might get a very stern, "Just go." Or you can just go, and step out in faith, and you'll find what God has been preparing you for - for a week and a month and a year - and you'll be blessed, and God will use you to make a difference. Saul met Jesus and began praying in Jesus' name, and it was heard in heaven. His prayers were sincere. He knew the Lord. You don't know the Lord, you just pray to get saved. That's what you do. Use Jesus' name, just ask Him to save you. That's how you're saved. If you know Him, you want to be heard in heaven, come pray real prayers. Make it real. Right? Don't play with God. Be serious.

Next week we will pick up in verse 17, and we'll see what happens next. I don't even know. You should read ahead. But we do want to go over Paul's many years of preparation because I think it'll blow your mind as you look at all those verses.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson  
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