

Ananias Is Called to Go to Paul

Acts 9:1-20

Nov. 18, 2018

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This is a conversion story. But there may be more to it than meets the eye.

Down through the years, the Bible has been a rich source of stories for Hollywood to dramatize. “The Ten Commandments,” “The Prince of Egypt,” “The Passion of the Christ.” But no one has ever attempted to make a big-budget movie out of what I believe is one of the most dramatic scenes in the whole Bible, and that is our story for today: the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus.

Can’t you just see it? Paul – probably played by Russell Crowe or Brad Pitt – starts out as an anti-Christian bad guy. But then, at the movie’s most spectacular moment, Paul is riding his donkey toward Damascus when – cue the CGI special effects! – the sky opens and a bright light shines down on him. Then Jesus – voiced, of course, by James Earl Jones – says, “Paul, Paul, why do you persecute me?” Throw in a love story, an explosion, and a couple chariot chases and I would you pay \$9 to see that.

This story deserves that kind of spectacular telling when you consider the pivotal role it plays in the development of Christianity. In fact, you could argue that this event is second only to the resurrection in importance. We’re first introduced to Paul at the stoning of Stephen, who was a Christ follower. Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, tells us that Saul (his pre-conversion name) was there, giving approval of this execution. Then, in Chapter 8, Luke says, “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.”

Saul was Pharisee, a zealous follower of the Jewish faith, and he had it fixed in his mind that anyone who wasn’t for his Jewish beliefs was against them, including those who were claiming that Jesus was the Messiah. Paul was so fervent in his faith that he was willing to travel a week’s journey, all the way to Damascus, to arrest more Christians and make sure this dangerous fringe movement didn’t undermine his beloved Judaism.

Instead it is Jesus who arrests Saul. A flash of light, a booming voice, a sudden blindness, and in an instant, the one who was Saul, the Christian persecutor, becomes Paul, the Christian missionary. Although Luke never intends this to be the case, Paul’s conversion became the blueprint for how people were to come to faith. In fact, for centuries, a recitation of your conversion experience was often your ticket to church membership and religious legitimacy.

While living in Chicago, I used to play basketball with a group of pastors from an evangelical church near me. I enjoyed the camaraderie but avoided any discussions of religion with them. One day after we finished a pastor from the church began asking about my spiritual journey. I tried to steer the conversation in another direction because I knew where it was going, but before I could block his religious shot, he said, “So, tell me your story.” My story? “Yeah, when were you saved?” In other words, he wanted to hear my Damascus road experience.

But I don't have one. Never saw the bright light or heard the James Earl Jones voice. If you ask me, Paul had it easy! He gets the proof, and then comes to faith. Most of us come to faith, and then spend our lives looking for proof. I can't point to an exact day and time when I went from unbeliever to believer. Although there have been times when my doubt was much stronger than my certainty, I don't ever remember a time when I didn't believe.

If a dramatic conversion were a requirement to become a member of our church, I don't know how many of us be here today. I can't give a day and time I started believing, because I've never stopped. My story of faith doesn't have a "before" like Paul's does. I guess I could give the date I joined the church, but that was only an outward sign of an inward belief I'd possessed ever since I could remember. While I know some of us can point to an exact day and time of our conversion, not all of us can. So then what are we to do with a story like Paul's?

I have relatives who live in Wilmington, NC, which during the 80s was a popular place to film movies. In fact, my step-grandmother - we called her MomMom - got a small part in the movie, "Firestarter," starring David Keith and a young Drew Barrymore. I remember how excited I was going to the theater. My MomMom, was going to be a movie star! I was on the edge of my seat during the whole movie, waiting for her dramatic entrance, waiting for her 30-foot tall face to come onto the screen.

And then the movie ended. I turned to my stepfather and said, "Where was MomMom?" And he said, "Didn't you see her?" "No!" "Remember the big chase scene down the sidewalk? She was the lady in the yellow dress that got pushed into the garbage can." I thought she was going to be a star, but in reality, she was only an extra.

If Paul is the star of our movie, then Ananias is "Jewish Peasant #3," just a bit player in the story. After Paul is struck blind, he is sent on ahead to Damascus to wait for further instructions. Meanwhile, God comes to Ananias and says, "Go to see a man named Saul from Tarsus, lay hands on him, and restore his sight." Now, Ananias is no dummy. He's read the paper and heard the water-cooler talk. He knows what Saul has been doing. In fact, Ananias may have a brother or a cousin who has already felt Saul's wrath. Have you ever had one of those moments where you say, "You want me to do WHAT, Lord?" This is one of those moments for Ananias. I imagine in his head he responded, "Oh, I'll lay hands on him, all right!" It's one thing to love Jesus, but it's a whole other thing to love the people Jesus loves! But Ananias is obedient in his faith, so he goes to the former persecutor of the Christians and greets him as "Brother Saul."

How would you react if you were called to extend hospitality to an enemy, to someone with whom you are at odds or that you were scared of? I read an article recently about a church that was struggling with an issue similar to Ananias'. A man who had started attending the church and wanted to join was a convicted pedophile seeking to find forgiveness and a new start. As a church, what do you do there? This faith stuff isn't easy. Someone you love and respect posts something controversial or divisive on social media. What do you do with that? What do you do when the line between ally and enemy gets blurred? Someone else in Ananias' place might have sought vengeance for what Saul had done. But while we might wish for the destruction of our enemies, God works toward their transformation.

I told you this was a conversion story, but I wasn't talking about Paul. Sure, he's converted in the most supernatural of ways, but that's not usually how it happens, is it?

Who had the most dramatic conversion in this story? Was it Paul, who went from persecuting those who called on the name of the Lord to calling on that name himself? Or was it Ananias, who was able to lay healing hands on the man who was initially coming to Damascus to arrest Ananias and his friends?

I don't believe this story is about how we should come to faith. I'm sure each of us here could tell a unique story about our faith journey, even if it's not completed yet. It's obvious that God works in a variety of ways to bring people to faith. Conversion is not just a one-shot divine zap. I believe conversion needs to take place in us every day, because every day when we wake up, we may be called to go to someone we don't particularly like to speak a word of peace or friendship. Every day we need to be nudged or pushed closer to Christ. We never become so wise or so adept at faith that our conversion stops. I believe conversion is an ongoing process as we become less like who we were and more like who God wants us to be – an instrument of peace in this volatile world.

It's not how we're brought to faith that matters. Maybe you have a dramatic before/after story like Paul, or maybe your faith has grown like the petal-by-petal opening of a flower. Some conversions are revolutionary; some take a lifetime to happen. Doesn't matter. What matters is what you do with it. The lasting mark of conversion is not some date circled in red on the calendar, but the whole story of our life. The evidence of conversion is a transformation, a changed life; Paul's just happened to be a little more public than most others. But it's Ananias who sets the more realistic example for us. He is not some spectacular Christian. We never hear him teach or preach. In fact, we never hear from him again after this story. He's just an ordinary person, a bit player in the larger drama, just like you and me. But it's his courage that allows Paul to start his new life.

Ananias may have been just an extra, but Christ still nudges us to work alongside him. Notice that for both Paul and Ananias, their conversion included a call. Paul was called to preach the word of Christ to the world; Ananias was called to preach the word of Christ to Paul. Someone among us may be Paul, but more likely we are Ananias, called to make a difference in the life one other person. Who was your Ananias? Who helped open your eyes to the wonders of God? And to whom are you being called to be Ananias? To whom is God nudging you to extend God's grace, to call "brother" or "sister"? I believe we can all be Ananias to for someone else. I pray that we are converted each and every day, taking one step closer to Christ, which usually means one step further out of our comfort zone. May we have the faith to trust God's leading and the courage to call someone "brother" or "sister," even when the names they call us aren't nearly as nice. No, this faith stuff isn't easy, is it? Thanks be to God.