

Words and Deeds: Faith Beyond Fear
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 146, Matthew 11:1-6, Acts 9:10-22

Today's final Scripture reading is Acts 9:10-22. May God add His richest blessing on the reading of His holy Word. "In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. 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. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place 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 saints 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 carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before 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. 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." 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. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ."

Most everyone has a limit as to what their fear limit is. I can handle great big roller coasters – I couldn't until I was about 14 – but I never, ever, ever want to zipline. I've done a ski lift twice in my life, and I'm not interested in a third time. Other people have no problems with heights and would scale Mt. Everest tomorrow, but a horror movie freaks them out, or the sight of a spider or blood or clowns, who knows!

Fear takes all sorts of forms and shapes and sizes; we're all afraid of different things. But they all boil down to a few essential fears. We fear pain and suffering, and we fear death. All our other fears are connected to those two. Because without those two things, there's nothing to fear. We fear the unknown because of these two possibilities; if all the possibilities are good, we don't worry about the details. We fear losing a job or a loved one for the same reasons. Think about something gigantic, something like our salvation. Why do we want to be saved from hell? Because we fear the pain of judgment. Fear is actually pretty simple at its core.

But today's passage shows that God's thoughts on fear are different from ours, and doing what we fear (when He commands it) can lead to incredible benefit. More than that, we see that forgiveness, in faith, moves us beyond fear and into the grace where God does His awesome work. So let's dive in, starting with a refresher.

Last week, Saul was like an untamed animal bullishly attacking Christians, locking them up, sending them to the high priest to be charged with blasphemy for following Jesus – it was a potential death sentence for anyone convicted. He was so effective that he'd cleared out Jerusalem of almost all the Christian but the apostles, who as far as we can tell had gone into hiding. But the disciples were now spreading word of Jesus throughout not only Jewish territory but into Samaria and out to Jewish communities far removed from Israel. Saul is hot on their trail.

He gathered a posse and got letters of introduction from the high priest so that he could travel over 130 miles to Damascus to start a dragnet, arresting Christians from there all the way down to Jerusalem. But on the way, the risen Lord Jesus confronted Saul in a brilliant light, saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Jesus sends him into Damascus blinded. And Saul, knowing what has happened, fasts completely for three days, not knowing what's going to happen to him.

That's where we catch up with Ananias. He's a disciple living in Damascus. Don't know if he's from there, which is possible – there was a large Jewish community there, in what is one of the world's oldest cities. But my guess is that he's packing up shop. He's getting ready to leave. Why? Because even though Saul is sitting in town blind, he's been there for three days, and word has gotten around what he's there for. Because in a moment, during his conversation with the Lord, Ananias will mention why Saul is there. He knows. This monster from the south has come to wreak havoc on the north.

Just when things are starting to look bad, Ananias has a vision from the Lord in the night. The Lord calls to Him, and he replies, "Yes, Lord." "Here I am, Lord." It's the same phrase we hear from the prophets – it's a signal that God's servant is listening and ready to do what He asks. So God continues, "Get up and go to Saul of Tarsus – he's staying at Judas' house on Straight Street. He's praying, and he's had a vision of a man named Ananias coming to him to place his hands on him and restore his sight."

And Ananias, who moments ago is like, "Yes, Lord, here I am," is suddenly like, "Am I on Practical Jokes and Bloopers?" He's like, "Wait a minute. You want me to get up and go visit a man who's been getting your saints arrested and killed. Um, you know about this guy, right, God? I mean, we're talking the same guy. Because I can't imagine I'm getting it straight. Maybe this isn't a vision from God at all; maybe it's a bad dream brought on by bad falafel and hummus."

Now I want to stop us right here for a couple of reasons. First, I want to look momentarily at this word "saints." This is the first time the word appears in the New Testament. I know some of us have been raised in traditions that define saints as particular people that the church has declared to have been true Christians who are without a doubt in the presence of God. That's not what it means ever in the New Testament. It literally means "the holy people." All of us who are disciples of Jesus, who will stand firm in our faith to the end, we're the saints. Ananias is not singling out anyone in particular or making a theological statement – he's referring to the believers who have suffered in Jerusalem. It's just an aside, but it's important so we don't get tripped up on it.

But let's get to the meat of it, the real issue here. Ananias decides he's going to tell God what God already knows! Do you really know who you're dealing with here, God? If only you knew! I was reminded of a famous song while I was thinking about this; it won a Grammy. It was a song by the singer Meat Loaf, and maybe you've heard of it. It's titled, "I'd Do Anything For Love (But I Won't Do That.)" That's kind of the attitude that Ananias has here, isn't it? I would do anything for you, Lord...but is that really what you want me to do? I won't do *that*!

We should be really careful about telling the Lord what we think He should want rather than what He actually tells us He wants! How many of our prayers are for what we want rather than what God has put into place? We pray for many things when we have no understanding of the Lord's will about them.

Now a lot of times we do it without even thinking about it. You all know I'm a fan of the late R.C. Sproul, and during the last several years of his life, he dealt with a lot of ailments that came from too many decades of smoking – he was able to immediately give up a lot of things when he became a Christian, but smoking stuck with him for a long time. And so he had COPD, he was on oxygen, that sort of thing, even though he was able to preach and teaching almost up until his death.

The associate pastor at the church where Sproul preached one morning got up in the first service and prayed, "God, we pray this morning that you would just deal with all of Dr. Sproul's ailments once and for all." After the service, R.C. came up to him kind of jokingly and said, "That's the first time I know of that anybody ever prayed for my death!" R.C. finished up by saying, "He prayed for me very differently in the second service!"

We often think we know what's best, but God always knows. He knows what He is doing. He knew when He chose to rescue Saul from the path he'd taken. He knew when He set Saul on his course to become not just any old disciple but an apostle, a foremost leader in the early church. And He knew what He was doing when he made Saul, who was steeped in the history and tradition and law of Judaism, into the apostle to the Gentiles who knew nothing of Judaism. It was ironic, and it made Saul reliant on God's strength rather than his own.

Why does Ananias have a problem? Why does Ananias think he knows better than God? Was it that he was a "bad" disciple? No – we all know, we all do this. There are two human traits at the root of the issue – fear and unforgiveness. Fear and unforgiveness are really closely related to one another; they are two sides of the same coin. Fear says "I can't" because I am afraid of the pain and suffering that I might experience as a result. Unforgiveness says "I can't" because of the pain and suffering I have already experienced as a result.

Ananias has a real and justifiable fear here. He is dancing into the lion's den. God tells him to go to the most dangerous person on earth if you're a Christian and lay hands on him and, through the Holy Spirit, restore his sight. The one thing that is currently stopping Saul from carrying out his plan, as far as Ananias knows, he's going to give back to him. What is to stop Saul from arresting him first? "Thanks for the blessing; you have the right to remain silent." Ananias' fear is not irrational; it's based in everything Saul has done. Yet God knows better.

You know what? Ananias' unforgiveness is also understandable. At this point, Ananias doesn't even know if Saul is looking for forgiveness, if he sees anything wrong with what he's done. Ananias probably lost neighbors, friends, even family to Saul's rampage. Jesus said to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, but the Psalms are full of prayers where the Psalmists say "strike down the wicked who would hurt your people."

But God isn't concerned about either one of these things. "Go," God says. Get busy with what I have for you to do. And in this circumstance, probably because Ananias' feelings are so reasonable, God tells him what's happening. God has chosen Saul to be His chosen instrument to carry His name far and wide, to his own people and then (first and foremost) to the pagan world. This is actually a term that applies to all Christians in the New Testament; we are all chosen as God's vessels, though not all of us are called to the same kind of service. In spite of all the harm Saul has done, God has picked him out and is going to use him to proclaim the name he once hated so much – the name of Jesus.

Ananias has had his say, God has spoken again, and yes, he is a good disciple, he goes. He confirms for Saul that the vision that he had from Jesus was real, and Saul's sight is restored just as the vision had promised. Something like scales fall off Saul's eyes. Now this is interesting, because scales are just like what you'd think they are, something like fish scales.

But in Greek, the root word for "scales" and the root of the word "leprosy" are the same. It's almost as if Saul has had an unclean infection of the eye, something that would make him unable to worship in the temple, something that makes him unclean in the sight of God. There was, in a sense, a deep infection in Saul's soul. Despite his incredible learning in the Jewish faith, he had a sickness, an uncleanness that blinded him to the truth of Jesus. And God brought that out in a physical way and then cured him of it. When we think of the lyrics of Amazing Grace, "was blind but now I see," it was doubly true in Saul's case.

And because of Ananias' moving in obedience, Saul's story as a believer begins. He's immediately baptized; he spends a couple of days getting to feel better after the trauma he experienced; he talks with the disciples at length for several days. And then he does the unimaginable...he starts preaching Jesus in the synagogue.

Because he is so well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, he can show point by point how Jesus has fulfilled all the messianic prophecies. He is so good at it that the people are utterly confounded. Here this raging tiger has become the very thing he once attacked. And he grows more and more powerful; the more he preaches, the more the Spirit works, the more he understands and the more convincing he becomes. Everyone is baffled. I don't doubt by the language that some of the Jews thought he'd gone mad. This transformation is so complete, so total, that they couldn't wrap their heads around it.

So here's my only question for you this week: *who's your Saul?* What relationship do you have that would be transformed if you lived that relationship in grace and forgiveness rather than fear and unforgiveness? It might not lead to a radical turnaround like we saw in Saul's life, but it might...you never know. But it can't happen if you hold on to the double poison of fear and unforgiveness.

I really don't like it when God decides to make my recent personal life into a sermon illustration, but this week it seems He wanted to do it. So the last several weeks at work, at Compassion, have been stressful. I had to take some time off unexpectedly to take care of my mom. My family was apart more of the summer than we were together. Our cat hated that everyone was gone so he was waking me up every hour or two in the night. I was working on a few hours of sleep, and so some errors in my work crept in; I take responsibility for that. In the midst of all of this is our yearly golf outing, one of the two really big fundraisers of the year, and that creates even more stress for everyone. A ton of nitpicking at work about insignificant things.

Things reached the boiling point this week as the event finally hit and then everyone wanted an immediate tally of the funds we'd raised. It was a nightmare. And in the midst of all this, there were lots of accusations thrown around – why wasn't this check in our figures earlier? Why wasn't this data entered into this program yet? Many of the complaints about my work were about gifts that hadn't even come into the center before I'd left for the week. And all of them were through email so they couldn't be hashed out in person. You know how email is; you don't know the tone of it, so you stew over the meaning. “What did he mean when he said X? What did she mean by that?”

My attitude went into the toilet. I went from a little angry at myself over my mistakes to really angry at my boss. I was reacting in fear – fear over the fact that we need the income from the job – and unforgiveness – how dare anybody make all these false charges against me? I was starting to obsess over it, figuring out in my head what I might say in a conversation. Couldn't get it out of my head, was losing sleep over it. Wondering about quitting.

Friday morning, 5am, no alarm, way early, I wake up, it's the first thing on my mind. When my mind went into this same pattern again, a very distinct thought from the Spirit came, and it was this: “this isn't me.” Immediately, even though I was half asleep, I prayed and I rebuked whatever spirit of unforgiveness and fear and whatever was hassling me. Then I was able to go right back to sleep for a couple hours and then start writing this sermon. I'm now living with a spirit of forgiveness and grace in this whole difficult situation.

Now you may think, “woah, waitaminute, rebuking spirits, that's pretty weird.” And it's pretty weird for me too. I am not the first to go to a supernatural explanation because the vast majority of things are my own fault, the result of my sinful self getting in the way of what God actually wants. But there are spiritual realities in this world, and when you're working on the front lines of the pro-life movement, saving lives, protecting young women from the harm that Satan wants to do to them by convincing them that they can get rid of their children without consequences, there's a spiritual battle going on, and sometimes you see it in action.

I'm not going to tell you I'll have a job there after next week; who knows what God's plans are? He could be stirring things up so that other plans He has will be accomplished. But now I know that I can go into this situation with the attitude God wants me to have, not stewing and worrying and refusing to do what God wants me to do because I've let fear get in the way.

And that's what I want for you this week, as I believe God does. There's someone you need to forgive, someone you need to no longer fear, so that a relationship can take root and flourish. There's someone you need to stop telling God, "do you know what they've done to me?" about and just love them. Might be a family member, a former friend or colleague. It might be someone you don't know that is different from you, maybe a different race or ethnicity, that you've avoided not really out of hate but out of fear. And maybe it's just someone you need to invite to church and the only fear you have is that they'll say "no" or maybe not like you as much. Whatever it is, ask God to give you the faith to move beyond your fear. Because we need more Sauls, more people boldly asking people to know Jesus. And none of us might be that person. We may very well be an Ananias who only needs to obey God's call and give that Saul out there the truth of God's call on their lives.