

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Arise and Go: Ananias - the reluctant servant

Sometimes God calls Christians to do hard things. That was certainly the case for all three of the men we are considering in this series about people to whom God said, "Arise and go" in the Bible.

Jonah was given the hard task of going to Nineveh to tell a nation that had previously shown little interest in God, that God was going to judge them. That's not exactly what I'd call an easy task.

Today we are going to consider Ananias in the New Testament. God told him to go and speak to Paul who had just been saved. As we'll see today, this wasn't an easy task as Paul had developed a reputation for persecuting Christians. Perhaps Ananias thought it was a trap?

Finally, next week we'll consider Philip, who was told to go into the desert to speak to a man from Ethiopia. Considering the fact that Philip was in the middle of a great work in Samaria, where many people were hearing the good news of the Gospel and being saved, you could understand if Philip felt unsure about this task. Wasn't he needed in Samaria?

Each of these examples, in their own ways, highlight to us the fact that God sometimes asks His people to serve Him in ways that don't always make complete sense to us, but that are always best when seen according to the wisdom of God. The challenge, then, for us today is to obey the Lord however He calls us to serve Him. When we think about it, away from the heat of the moment, of course that makes sense. Since God knows all things and orders circumstances according to His sovereign, all wise purpose, of course we should get in line and obey the things He commands, even if we don't understand. As we'll see with Ananias, that can be much harder when we're in the situation where God has asked us to do something that seems to us to be very difficult and hard, and perhaps even dangerous. So today I want to point out three lessons from the life of Ananias that might help us become obedient servants of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I sometimes wonder if Ananias is given a little bit of a hard time. Many commentators criticise the fact that he was initially reluctant to go and meet Paul, and instead raises his concerns to God. Perhaps that was a lack of faith and trust on his part and not behaviour fitting of a faithful Christian. Or perhaps he was just voicing perfectly reasonable concerns to God and asking for confirmation. After all, it's easy to understand why he would be wary of being in contact with Paul, who had a reputation for harming Christians (see Acts 9:13). Whatever the case, there's a phrase that "people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones" so with that in mind I'll not be too critical of Ananias today.

I want to make three main points this morning from the account of Ananias in Acts 9:10-19:

1. I want to encourage us to **develop a reputation for obedience**. That's roughly Acts 9:10-12;
2. I'll summarise Acts 9:13-16 by saying, "**Tell God your concerns but then obey anyway**";
3. When we think about Acts 9:17-19 I'll say, "**Obey God even if there seems to be nothing in it for you.**"

1. Develop a reputation for obedience

Let's read together the first part of our passage for today then, Acts 9:10-12: *"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.' So the Lord said to him, '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. 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.'"*

Probably most of you are aware of the miraculous conversion of Saul, or Paul as we usually refer to him (see Acts 13:9). If not, take some time to read Acts 9:1-9 and marvel at how God saved this man who was determined to wipe out Christianity. What a wonderful display of the grace and mercy of God! Paul was on his way to Damascus to hunt down the Christians there and destroy them, (Acts 9:1-2). But on the way God intervenes. Paul sees a light that is brighter than the noonday sun (see Acts 9:3, Acts 26:13), and the Lord Jesus speaks to Paul, "*Why are you*

persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4) So powerful an effect did this have on Paul, that he trusted in the Lord Jesus and his life was completely changed.

But Paul was left temporarily blinded by this bright light and his friends had to lead him to Damascus. (Acts 9:7-9). God had told him to wait there until God told him what to do next (Acts 9:6). That's where the verses we've read, (Acts 9:10-12) come into the account. This man, Ananias, lived in Damascus. The Lord speaks to him in a vision (Acts 9:10). How wonderful. Perhaps Ananias was initially thrilled to have such an experience of the Lord. But Ananias soon realised the Lord would ask him to do something he considered very hard. Ananias was to go to the house of Judas and find Paul (Acts 9:11-12). Somehow, when Ananias met Paul, Paul would be able to see again.

We'll speak some more in our next section about how hard Ananias thought this task would be but I want you to notice something in Acts 9:12. Did you see how God told Ananias that Paul had "*seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hands on him*"? God had already told Paul that Ananias was coming. Before He had told Ananias to go!

I wonder if this shows us that Ananias had developed a reputation for obeying God? Normally if we are going to volunteer somebody else to do something, it's a good idea to check with them first, isn't it! Otherwise we might be put in the embarrassing situation of explaining that in fact this person won't be helping because they don't want to. But we might say that God was confident in advance that Ananias would obey and go to Paul.

Of course, it could just be that God in His sovereignty knew the future and knew that Ananias would ultimately obey, so I don't want to put too much weight on this idea, but I certainly wonder if Ananias had developed a reputation for being a man who obeyed God. In fact, if you read another of Paul's accounts of his conversion in Acts 22:1-21, you'll read that Ananias was "*a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews...*" (Acts 22:12). That's one of the reasons that I wonder if God already told Paul that Ananias was coming. He had shown himself to be obedient to God over and over again.

How good it is if we can have a testimony like Ananias. We don't know much about him, but he clearly had a reputation for being devout, and was well respected by the people. Sometimes God asks us to do hard things, like He did to Ananias here. But most of the time, the things God asks us to do are not big and grand but rather small steps of obedience:

- Work hard at work;
- Love your wife;
- Love your children;
- Be kind to one another;
- Encourage one another;
- Don't gossip.

No doubt hundreds more examples could be mentioned, but do you see the point? We are mostly called to obey in the everyday things. Ananias had developed a habit of obeying God in the everyday things of life. So it was no surprise that God asked him to do something hard and was confident he would do it. We can't expect to obey in the big and grand things of life, if we fail to obey God in all the smaller, less glamorous, everyday things. So our first lesson from Ananias is to develop a reputation for obeying God.

Are there areas of your life where you know you are disobeying the instructions of Scripture? Bring them before God, and ask Him to help you to obey more over this coming week. Develop a habit of obedience to God in all the small areas of life, and it will be good training for a time in the future when God asks you to do something you consider to be much more difficult. Could God count on you or me to obey so that He could tell someone we were coming even before He had told us? May the Lord help us to be obedient servants!

2. Tell God your concerns but then obey anyway

Let's move on to think about Acts 9:13-16. Here we are going to make the point "Tell God your concerns but then obey anyway," so let's read how Ananias reacted to God's instruction:

"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.' But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for 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.'"

In Acts 9:13-16 we see that Ananias had some concerns about what God was asking him to do. Paul had a reputation for harming the Christians in Jerusalem. The beginning of Acts 9 says that Paul set off for Damascus "*breathing*

threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). His whole aim was to bring any Christians he found in Damascus as prisoners to Jerusalem. Paul was ruthless in his campaign against the Christians. In his account in Acts 22:4 he describes how he “persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women”. When he gives the same account to King Agrippa in Acts 26:1-32, he adds the details that he voted for many to be put to death (Acts 26:10). Listen to Acts 26:9-11: “Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”

We can begin to see then why Ananias would be concerned about going to see this man Paul. Whilst I'm sure he wanted to believe that Paul had been truly saved, it almost sounded too good to be true. Was it a trap? Would Ananias end up like so many before him, bound and taken to Jerusalem to be killed?

In any case, Ananias does a good thing. He brings his concerns to the Lord. That's much better than just outright refusing. Much better to admit our concerns to God and ask Him for confirmation than to refuse to obey. I'm thankful for examples like Gideon in the Old Testament and Ananias in the New Testament who admitted their fears and doubts to God and asked for confirmation. As we've already said, perhaps this demonstrated a lack of faith, but how good of God to record for us the best way to deal with our doubts and fears. Take them to God. Ask Him about them. What was the result for Ananias? He got a special confirmation from the Lord. The Lord reassured Ananias that He had a job for Paul. That Paul really had become a Christian, and further that Paul would be used mightily to spread the Gospel to many places around the world. In fact, Paul would suffer much for the sake of the Gospel (Acts 9:16) and in obedience to the Lord. Ananias perhaps feared suffering for himself, but God tells him that in fact it was Paul who would end up suffering as a result of obedience to God.

With this encouragement, Ananias goes to visit Paul. Have you noticed what happens here? God gave Ananias a job to do. Ananias was concerned about it as he was perhaps scared of Paul. But instead of running away and refusing to obey, like we saw Jonah initially did in last week's broadcast, he brings his concerns and fears to God. God encouraged him and then Ananias goes and does what God had asked, just like God had told Paul he would. What a good example for us whenever we are doubtful or fearful over some task the Lord has asked us to do!

It's natural that we are fearful sometimes in our call to serve the Lord. Perhaps this is in what we might consider huge things, like the call to leave all we know and love and travel to another place to serve as missionaries, spreading the Gospel where it's never been heard before. Or perhaps more likely we can be fearful over seemingly smaller things. Sharing the Gospel with a neighbour. Being obedient to Christ even when it might make you unpopular with your friends or colleagues. There are so many things that might make us fearful. But let's be like Ananias and take our concerns to God, and tell Him all about them. Ask Him for the needed boldness to help you. After all, He's the one who promises to give us “*grace to help in time of need*” (see Hebrews 4:16).

So when you are fearful over inviting your friend or neighbour to church with you, instead of getting so fearful that we just clam up and don't invite them for fear of rejection, why not ask the Lord for help and like Ananias go ahead and invite them anyway. Or when God asks you to be filled with integrity at work and not go along with some dishonest practice, tell God about your fears over your job, and your reputation with your colleagues. And then go ahead and obey God anyway. Whether Ananias was demonstrating a lack of faith or not, he teaches us a good lesson. Tell God your concerns but then obey anyway.

Don't let fear stop you obeying God. Think about the blessing that resulted from this visit to Paul. Paul was used mightily in spreading the Gospel to the Gentile nations, a heritage we stand in the good of today! He was influential in planting many churches and he wrote instruction for them that has been preserved in the Bible for our learning today. God's words to us through Paul have been influential for millions of people over 2,000 years. And Ananias played his part in that by being obedient even though he was afraid. What might God do for the blessing of many people as a result of you obeying Him this week, even though what He has asked you to do feels so daunting? May the Lord grant us boldness as we seek to obey Him.

3. Obey God even if there seems to be nothing in it for you

Then we come to the final section of our passage for today, Acts 9:17-19. Let's read them together: “*And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.*”

I said at the beginning that I wanted to use these verses to encourage us to Obey even if there seems to be nothing in it for you. We don't read a lot about Ananias in the Bible. I think all we know about him is related to this story. Once he performs this service for God by visiting Paul, he disappears off the scene so far as the biblical account is concerned. We don't read about any great reward for Ananias for his faithful obedience to God. We don't read that God had bigger and better service prepared for him in the future. Of course, perhaps those things happened but we just don't know and God didn't see fit to tell us.

Sometimes in the Bible God gave great promises and reasons when He gave a person instructions. Think of Abraham being told to leave his land and getting the promise that God would give him both land and family. Or the nation of Israel as a whole. They were told that if they obeyed God they would experience His blessing. Ananias had no such personal promise. God simply asked him to obey and do a job for Him. God wanted to use Ananias to help Paul, and would in turn use Paul to reach many with the Gospel. The best Ananias gets by way of encouragement is that he would be playing some small part in someone else being useful for the Lord. It probably says a lot about Ananias' character that he obeyed anyway.

This reminds me of what Jesus Himself said in Matthew 10:24-25: *"A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master."*

In fact, if you go away and read Matthew 10 later today you might be able to notice many of the verses that seem significant to this account of Ananias. I wonder if Ananias had heard about these words of the Lord? Whether he had or not, he certainly seems to be a lived out example of them. It was enough for Ananias that he obey God and in that sense be like the Lord Jesus, the perfectly obedient Servant. Ananias was not out only to serve if it benefited him personally or gained him a reputation. He served simply to be like his Master. That was enough for him. I wonder would it be for us?

Perhaps, more often than we'd like to admit, our choices about whether to serve God or not are influenced by how much recognition we will get for it. Will the other believers notice it and think well of me? Will I get further opportunities for service in the future if I do this service for the Lord?

Let's be careful to avoid that kind of thinking. We obey God simply because we want to be like the Lord. That is to be enough for us. If He chooses to use my service to accomplish great things for His honour and glory, then we praise God for that. But if He chooses to work mainly through others and use my obedience in a seemingly insignificant way, I must praise God for that too. To Him, not me, be the glory! (See Psalm 115:1). My role is to be obedient and become more and more like Christ. All the rest is up to God, and He knows best. So let's be like Ananias who obeyed even though there didn't seem to be much in it for him.

There's one verse left that we haven't really mentioned and it occurred right at the start in Acts 9:10. Let's just read it again: *"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.'"*

Did you notice Ananias' response to the Lord? *"Here I am Lord."* Isn't that great? God had something to say to Ananias and there he was immediately available and ready to hear what God had to say to Him. God had a purpose for Ananias. He was to be used, as we've seen, to help Paul, this new Christian who had undergone such a dramatic life change, and whom God was to use mightily. How it must have affected Paul when Ananias greets him, *"Brother Saul"* (Acts 9:17). He once was a persecutor but now was a brother in Christ. How wonderful is the grace of God! But this great blessing flowed from Ananias' readiness and willingness to hear from God. It reminds me of Isaiah's prophetic words *"Here am I, send me"* (Isaiah 6:8).

Ananias was ready to be used by the Lord. Sure, he had some hesitation when he heard what the task was, but as we've seen he obeyed anyway. Do we have a similar attitude where we are ready and waiting for God to instruct us? And when we sense He is trying to teaching us something, do we say *"Here I am Lord"*? What a good example Ananias sets to us here.

I think this good example is made even stronger when we remember that we've already pointed out that we don't know anything else about Ananias, and so far as we know he wasn't one of the influential figures in the early church. He probably wasn't one of the big names that everyone knew. He was just a simple believer. But God had a use for him, and he was ready to be used. May that be an encouragement to all of us to be ready for God to use us, and willing to obey whatever He commands. What might be accomplished for the Lord if each one of us, whether we consider ourselves an important believer or more of an obscure, quiet believer, gave ourselves to the Lord in obedience and waited for Him to tell us what to do. Let's be specific. Whoever we are, whether the task is big or small, what is the Lord asking us to obey Him in today, and this week? Who does the Lord want us to go and encourage? What task needs doing that the Lord wants us to do? Let's obey and like Ananias say, *"Here I am"* (Acts 9:10). Today

and this week, let's start to develop a reputation for obeying God. Let's talk with God about our concerns over what He's commanded us to do. But then, let's obey anyway, whether there is any immediate benefit for us or not.

So,

- Was Ananias a reluctant servant or not?
- Was he a faithful servant or not?

I'll leave you to decide on that. But we've seen today some useful lessons from Ananias. We've been encouraged to gain a reputation for obedience to God. We've been exhorted to bring our concerns to God, but then obey Him anyway. And we've been challenged to obey God even when there seems to be nothing in it for us physically. May the Lord help us to be obedient servants and recognise that for us, it's enough that we're like the Lord Jesus.

Thank you for listening to this *Truth for Today* talk on "Ananias, the reluctant servant", talk number T1077.

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