

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: A Disciple in Damascus

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Scripture: Acts 9:1-19 (Emphasis on 10-19)

¹ Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest

² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.

⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.

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

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

¹¹ 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.

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

¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.

¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

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

¹⁷ 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."

¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,

¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Transcript:

Hello, everyone online. Thank you for joining us today. My name is Anthony Ballard. I am the Co-Director of our Go and Grow Program Department here at Bell Pres, and happy 4th of July. I can't really see everyone, but good to see, for the most part. The scripture from today comes from Acts chapter nine, verses 10 through 19. "There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias and the Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' 'Here I am, Lord,' he replied. 'Get up and go to a street called Straight,' the Lord said to him, 'to the house of Judas and asked for a man from Tarsus named Saul since he is praying there. In a vision, he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and placing his hand on him so that he may regain his sight.' 'Lord,' Ananias answered. 'I have heard many reports about this man, how he has done harm to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has authority here from the chief priest to arrest all who call on your name.'

But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for this man is my chosen instrument to take my name to Gentiles, Kings, and Israelites. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.' Ananias went and entered the house. He placed his hands on him and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road you were traveling has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' At once, something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. After taking some food, he regained his strength." Let's pray. Lord Jesus, you said Ananias, "Go." And you said that same thing to me over a year ago, which is why I'm here. So Lord, I pray that you would use me in this time to inspire and encourage your people, your disciples in this room. May we all learn and grow together. In the name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.

So I think there's two experiences that every Christian needs to have at some point in their life and the first experience needs to be an experience of the love of Jesus. It's something that you can't learn. It just has to happen. It's a feeling of this overwhelming gratitude that you just have and this feeling of the truth that the savior Jesus loves you. And for some of us, this will come out in the form of tears. And I had this experience for the first time when I was 16 years old at a Christian camp for high schoolers called Hume Lake down in Southern California. And the funny thing is, I didn't even want to go to this camp. I tried actively not to go, but all my friends, they made me go. And some of them may be watching online right now, if you guys were there. But that moment was a key moment in my life because I cite that. Even though I was raised in a Christian family going to church and everything, I cite that moment at camp as the first time where I decided to be a follower of Jesus.

So my friends and I who were all there, we were praying together and we were all crying together, and we were doing the ugly cry. You know that? But I thought, if I'm loved this much, I have to follow Jesus. It's so important to know that Jesus loves you and I'm grateful for the many times that I've been able to feel this love. But the second experience that I think every follower of Jesus needs is the experience of the full authority and power of Jesus. That's the reason I'm on this stage right now, because preaching is not something that I wanted to do. It's something that I avoided actively. But Jesus told me, as you heard in my prayer, almost a year ago, he told me that this was something I was going to be doing. And I had no choice but to say, "Okay." So it was the love of Jesus that made me follow him at 16, but it's his authority and it's his power that has me obeying his commands at age 30.

It's the authority experience that both Saul and Ananias has had in this Acts chapter nine passage. They both had encounters with the risen Lord Jesus. This is the Jesus that said that all authority in heaven and earth having given to him. Jesus came to Ananias with a mission. Not as Jesus is friend, but as Jesus is Lord. This Jesus knocked Saul off his horse and blinded him for persecuting him. That was a few verses before this. So this Jesus that we see in this

stretch of passage, he's not mean, but he's just not nice either. But this is why I suggest these two experiences, because if you only know Jesus as authority, you won't experience his loving kindness, his mercy, his grace, his friendship. Instead, he becomes like a task master and everything we do is only fear or duty. But if you only know his friendship, you won't allow him to make any commands of you.

I don't know about you, but any of my friends, they can't command me to do anything. They can suggest it and I'll say yes or no. So if that's all Jesus is to you, if he's only your friend, he just becomes a genie who's supposed to grant our wishes disguised as prayers. This sermon series is called Lead, and the best way for any follower of Jesus to lead well is to know Jesus as Lord. This passage of Acts Nine that we read focuses on the conversion of a man named Saul. And it's an important story because in later chapters some of you may know that Saul goes on to be renamed Paul, the apostle Paul, and he's this absolute rockstar of the Christian faith. He goes on to write half the New Testament. He does many mighty deeds to advance the Kingdom of God. And Paul is so popular that if you hang around the theology nerds for a little while you'll hear this phrase.

You actually will hear "Paul says" more than "Jesus says". "Paul says." "Paul says." "Paul says." I've seen people say "Paul says" when the passage they're quoting from is actually from the Book of Peter. And that's not just a joke to laugh. It's true. But the fact is there's some amazing things that Paul says. Here's three of them. Philippians 4:6, Paul says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition with Thanksgiving present your requests to God." Romans 8:31 and 37, "If God is for us, who can be against us? In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." And in Second Timothy 4:7, "I have fought the good fight, I finished the race, and I have kept the faith." Paul has said some things that have helped us through anxiety that reminds us that we're overcomers. Half the New Testament is something that Paul says. So if you just take a shot at quoting something from the New Testament, you're 50% going to land on "Paul says."

But now, take a second and just imagine none of that existing. None of those scriptures, all of Paul's great deeds, none of that being done without the obedience of a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. This disciple Ananias only shows up this one time. So what I just read is all we've got. So there's no backstory on him. We don't get a post story follow-up. So Ananias comes and then he goes. He's like a character on a TV show that the writers wrote for one episode and then they just disappeared. And even in most overviews and commentaries on the Book of Acts, Ananias' name doesn't even get mentioned. But yet Jesus knew him, Jesus called him, and then Ananias's response was, "Here I am, Lord. Here I am, Lord." He knew the call of Jesus immediately. As soon as he heard his voice, he was ready to go.

So Ananias was like a bench player on a sports team. Bench players usually get called in during the final minutes when the team's already up 40 points and there's no chance of losing. But Jesus calls Ananias in the game when the mission was critical, when the score was scary. And Ananias was rightly concerned about the points of his mission, because Saul, or Paul, the man he had to pray for was a villain. He was threatening and getting people like Ananias killed or arrested. And so I don't need to give you many examples about why that was a suicide mission. So this is why in verse 13, Ananias tried to let Jesus know that Saul was scary. He said, "Lord, I've heard many reports about this man." But Jesus responds, "Go. This man is my chosen instrument to take my name to Gentiles, Kings, and Israelites." Basically saying, "This ain't about you, Ananias." ;Leadership in the Kingdom of God isn't about you, it isn't about me, but it's about what Jesus is doing.

Saul's conversion wasn't about him, but it was about his role in the larger church. Your greatest contribution to the Kingdom of God isn't what you do, but it's someone that you launch. You're leading someone else into their calling. Me being up here preaching right now isn't about me, but it's what God is doing in all of Bell Pres, all of you here in this room and our partners around the world. Something Pastor Scott Mann says to staff many times is that he says, "Part of our job is to make Scott Dudley look good." And I happen to take that literally when I took Scott Dudley suit shopping the first time. I missed the assignment. But Pastor Scott Mann, what he means when he says that is, as a staff person, as we're planning our small ministry things, we need to be sure that we're aligning with the larger vision that God has given our elders in our senior pastor of this church.

And the smartest thing Ananias did was that you listened and obeyed. While he had concerns about his mission, he didn't argue because the next verse simply says that he went to pray. "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 that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." He calls him brother, and in this moment the laying on of hands is so key because really the Christian faith rested on this moment. The fate of the world even rested on this moment. A lot was at stake. So Jesus had revealed to Ananias his big picture plan. There was a bigger idea at play here. This is why how we pray is so important, especially those of us who are trying to figure out what college we're going to go to or what career we're going to choose.

A few months ago, Pastor Dudley suggested to us, "Instead of praying to God, 'What is your plan for my life? What do you want me to do?' The question to ask is, 'God, what is your plan?' And so the big picture is important. Most of you have probably seen at least one of the many Marvel movies. If you're like me, you like them. But in 2008, the first Iron man movie came out, which is crazy to think about, because I was also 16 then. But this movie was a big kickoff for what we now have as the Marvel Cinematic Universe. But at the time that movie came out, Iron Man was just a C-List character. He had the worst selling comic books. Spider-Man was the only superhero that people cared about. But there's a line at the end of the first Iron man Movie where Samuel L. Jackson says, "You've become part of a larger universe and you just don't know it yet."

That line kick started what we now have as a franchise of 23 movies, having made \$22 billion in the box office, and there's rides at Disneyland and all this stuff. But it all started with a C-List character that only nerds like me knew about. "You've just become part of a larger universe and you just don't know it yet." When I was watching that movie for the first time, I didn't know how big it was going to get, just like I fail to see often how big God's plans are. And this is an imperfect example because Iron Man is now in A-List pop culture character while Ananias only had this one scene. He's mostly forgotten in the commentaries and in the overviews, because after that verse, we start following the story of Saul. And I'm just going to say, guys, this is my fourth time preaching at Bell Pres and if I don't mention Marvel comic books or Lord of the Rings in a sermon you just need to stop me because I'm taking myself way too seriously. There's always room for a cartoon or a comic book reference.

So not everyone who leads or has influence will become famous. And the question to ask yourself is, am I okay with that? Am I okay with having a small role in God's big picture plan? Am I okay with being an Ananias to a Saul? What we see in this moment is a domino effect. It goes from Jesus to Ananias, Ananias to Saul, and then Jesus says that Saul's job is that he's an instrument to take his name to Gentiles, Kings, and the Israelites. And we probably understand the importance of Gentiles, because Gentiles is anyone who is a non-Jew, which is probably most of us in here. And then the children of Israel, God's chosen people. Makes

sense, right? But then why does Jesus want his name to go before Kings? That's the key word here. And the fact is, because Jesus himself is a King. And I don't mean in how I used to use it. When I said Jesus was King, I used to think of it more as he's the best of all the gods. Like you say someone's the "King of basketball" or they're the "King of chess", if they're really good at something. But in John 18, while talking to Pontius Pilate, Pilate asks Jesus a question. He says, "So are you a King?" And Jesus tells him, "You say I'm a King. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world." Jesus is the King of the Kingdom of God and while Jesus says his kingdom is not of this world, he has every intention of having it in this world and he invites us in, all of us here, to advance his kingdom in this world. The Kingdom of God is the comprehensive rule of God over this whole planet, over every area of life with Jesus as King. His entire earthly ministry focused on this.

Reverend NT Wright says that, "The story of Jesus is the story of the Kingdom of God clashing with the Kingdom of Caesar." He says, "Jesus isn't only challenging Caesar's Kingdom, but also Caesar's type of kingdom. Jesus wants us, you and me, to advance his kingdom agenda and preach it all over this planet." While on earth, Jesus, he spoke about many things. He spoke about love, mercy, forgiveness, and justice, those being a few things. But the Kingdom of God is what Jesus focused on more than anything else. If you read in Acts chapter one, after his resurrection and before he ascended to heaven, Jesus spent 40 days talking about, is it up there? What does it say he talked about? You can read it. The Kingdom of God. It's in bold for you. And then the last chapter of Acts, Paul doing what he's commanded to do, he spends two years in a rented house preaching about, it's in bold, the Kingdom of God.

This is mission critical. The Kingdom of God isn't where we go. But it's about what God is doing right here on earth. This is why, at least in sanctuary, every week in sanctuary, they pray the Lord's Prayer. "Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus used Ananias to unleash Saul to get the word out to everyone who calls himself a king to let them know that a greater King and a greater kingdom had come, a stronger kingdom and one that's more worthwhile, one that is, quite frankly, more real. These Kings needed to know that their kingdoms will fall, but the kingdom that Jesus has will stand forever. And it's not a kingdom that's only up there. It's a kingdom that he's bringing right here. And today, Jesus holds the same message for anyone who will call themselves a King, any President, any Prime Minister, any mayor, any city council member, or HOA President.

Jesus says any kingdom or country or neighborhood that doesn't look like the Kingdom of God, Jesus will challenge it. The kingdom changes everything because it means that the rule of God over every area of life has come to earth as it is in heaven. This is the government, the type of government, that the whole world wants. Jesus says in mark, "That the arrival of the Kingdom of God is good news." So if you're a person who's concerned about communism, the Kingdom of God is good news. If you're concerned about or frustrated with capitalism, the Kingdom of God is good news, because this is why Jesus wanted his name to go before Kings, because he has a different way of doing things, a different way of ruling. He has a kingdom way of ruling with him at the top. Do you see the significance of Ananias' obedience? Why it was so important? There was a whole kingdom plan in motion that Jesus had. There's a seriousness to being courageous as disciples. There's serious weight to not being overcome with fear when Jesus calls us to action.

Let me ask you guys a question. Did you know that being a coward is a sin, a serious sin. In Revelation 21:8, cowards are listed with murderers, sorcerers, and liars among other things as being condemned to hell fire. And I think, why cowards? Aren't they a bit inconsequential,

something like that? But the truth is cowards delay God's mission. A coward is a person who lacks courage to do something dangerous or even unpleasant. Had Ananias succumbed to his fear, God's mission would have been delayed. Delay is a key word because his mission wouldn't have failed, it just would have had to go through some detours. And so cowards bring about those unnecessary detours. God doesn't want us to be cowards. He wants us to be courageous. And the thought about this cowardice being such a serious sin, it makes me think about all those fear-nots that we see in the Bible. They say we have 365 do-not-be-afraids, one for each day. And some of those are words to be encouraged by.

Others of them are commands like in Joshua 1:9, God says to Joshua, "Be strong and courageous." And a second time, he makes it imperative and he says, "Have I not commanded you be strong and courageous?" Sometimes the inspirational word that we want from Jesus is nothing more than a command where he just says, "Go." Jesus, being a King, like the role of any great King or leader is to inspire courage in his people to do the seemingly impossible, not to fear. And Jesus is our best example of what it looks like to do something, to face fear, without letting it control us or keep us from being obedient to God. So I want to encourage you if you saw that verse for the first time in Revelation and you're concerned, you don't have to fear that, because as children of God, we don't have to fear the condemnation mentioned in that verse.

There's 100 more commands of fear-not than there are commands condemning cowards. Fear isn't the issue here. Ananias, I'm sure, had to have a little bit of fear. But it's the cowardice that causes us to disobey God out of fear. In God's Kingdom, every leader is nothing more than simply a disciple, someone who follows and is obedient to Jesus. And at Bell Pres, you guys know that we call them all-in followers of Jesus. But an all-in follower of Jesus just means disciple. So as a disciple, Ananias heard the Lord's call and he responded with, "Here I am." He listened to the mission of Jesus and he obeyed and did exactly what Jesus told him to do. So if you notice something here, a few verses that I didn't read, it says that when Jesus calls to Saul, Saul responds "Who are you, Lord?" Because he didn't know Jesus yet. But then Ananias, this obscure man in the Bible. When Jesus calls him, he responds with, "Here I am, Lord." That's a disciple and that's what I want to be.

So for today, as you're probably starting to think about fireworks and barbecue and stuff, here's the one thing you have to remember. It's simple and it's in the first half of verse 10. It says, "There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias." There's no adjectives. It doesn't say he was the best disciple or the most faithful disciple. It doesn't have any fluffy words, because being a follower of Jesus is the fluffy word. But a disciple also is any age too. Kids from one to 92, like the Christmas song says, because remember, last week we learned that the 12 disciples were teenagers, with John probably being 15 years old. So Bell Pres, all you need to be is a disciple. Wherever you live, work, play, and learn like Ananias. There's also a Saul out there waiting for you to pray for them to launch them into their calling and how Jesus wants to use them.

And it's very possible that whoever that Saul figure is, is a person that you won't like. It might be someone from a competing business, a rival sports team. It might be an ex boyfriend or girlfriend. But Jesus is saying, "Go. I want to use that person for something. Got pray for them." So I want to pray for you as a type of Ananias myself. So if you can all stand, if you're able, I like to pray for you. I want to commission you all to be Ananias like figures, wherever you are. Ananias is the hero of Acts chapter nine. He just didn't become famous for it. So, however, big or small your story may be, it just needs to start how his story started. And it says, "There was a disciple in Bellevue. There was a disciple in Kirkland. There was a disciple

in Renton. There was a disciple at Microsoft. There was a disciple at Amazon. There was a disciple at Lake Washington or Juanita High School. There was a disciple at Timber Ridge." That's all we need to be. So let me pray for you. Jesus, when you call us to our missions like you did Ananias, may we respond like him saying, "Here I am." Jesus. I pray that you would prepare the Sauls that we will encounter, prepare their hearts, knock them off their horses, whatever you have to do to get their attention, Lord, Jesus prepare us to be courageous, to do your will to advance your kingdom wherever we live, work, play, and learn, everywhere on this east side, at every job, and in every school, Lord. May we be disciples wherever we are. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read Luke 22:24-26 and answer the below questions with your friends, family or All In small group.

Opening Questions:

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions -- Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions – Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following

- Has there been a time when you've experienced the commanding authority of Jesus in your life? How about a time when you've experience his overwhelming love?
- Ananias had a key role as a disciple of Jesus, yet he's one of the least famous people in the Bible. Do you struggle with feeling insignificant or invisible in your role in God's big plan?
- What encouragement do you have for overcoming cowardice with courage?
- Ananias was a disciple in Damascus. Where are you called to be a disciple?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.