

THE LORD HAS SENT ME

SERIES: THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS

By Steve Zeisler

C.T. Studd was a leader in the missionary movement that took the gospel overseas from England in the early twentieth century. There is a short rhyme associated with him that today we would probably call his “personal mission statement”:

“Some like to dwell within the sound of church and chapel bell—
I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell.”

He had caught Jesus’ passion for those who are lost and headed for destruction. I am often tempted to associate myself more with those in the other group, who find it convenient to dwell in surroundings that are familiar, and to be, as nearly as possible, free of danger and uncertainty. But no one can be a disciple of Christ very long without sharing his heart for those who are lost.

How are we to become motivated to get outside ourselves, to see our Christianity not just as a place of sanctuary and encouragement but as a staging ground for outreach? Will it be by listening to lectures and sermons, or learning strategies and ways of thinking about unbelievers developed by sociological studies? No—the way to acquire the motivation we need is to be men and women of prayer. Spending time with the living Savior is the best way to see with his eyes.

The point of this series on prayers of the Bible is for us to learn to pray similarly to Old- and New-Testament saints who spoke to God on various occasions, to learn some of the lessons that they learned. The first individual whose life and prayer we’re going to consider in this message is a man named Ananias, whose story is found in Acts 9.

An ordinary man at a critical moment

Paul would later remember Ananias this way: “He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there [Damascus]” (Acts 22:12). Ananias was a good man who had deep roots in Judaism. He loved the God of the Old Testament, he loved the laws that he had grown up with, and he was faithful to keep them. When he heard the gospel preached, he readily gave his life to Christ. He was a deep, genuine, Jewish Christian, and he continued to live with the respect of his non-Christian Jewish neighbors.

There is no evidence that Ananias was anything other than an ordinary man. He is not spoken of as a leader in the church in Damascus or as a man of notable giftedness. He was a good man who loved righteousness and who lived a life of honor. He would fit in well in our own church. There are people very much like him here who pray often and from the heart, who are burdened to live what they believe, and whose love for Christ is sincere.

Most of us don’t imagine ourselves playing a key role in world events. Yet, as it will turn out, ordinary Ananias is going to be God’s servant at one of the critical moments in all of the history of the Christian church and therefore in all of the history of the world.

His prayer is a two-way conversation with God. Acts 9:10-19a:

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.

The story of Saul of Tarsus had begun two chapters earlier in the book of Acts, and of course he would eventually be much better known as the apostle Paul. He began his life with a virulent antagonism to Jesus and Jesus’ people. He cheered as Stephen was stoned to death, then enthusiastically persecuted and imprisoned believers in Judea. He gained permission to extend the persecution to a wider area that included Damascus. On the way to Damascus, earlier in chapter 9, he was met by the Lord in a bright light and speech from heaven. Saul fell to the ground blind. He was led with a new dread of the holiness of God into Damascus and told to wait for instructions. He knew that Jesus had spoken to him. He knew that he was unworthy of hearing. He knew that life would never be the same. He went without food or drink for days. He couldn’t see anything and he spent that time in prayer, uncertain of what the future would hold.

Now, Ananias knew of Saul of Tarsus as the enemy, the persecutor. He knew of Saul’s plans for the destruction of Jewish believers like him in Damascus. But he didn’t know the Lord had reached out to Saul in a vision.

What can we learn from Ananias’ prayer?

A dangerous assignment

First of all, when Jesus spoke to Ananias, his initial response was “Yes, Lord.” That’s a good response. The next time Jesus speaks to you, the healthy, wise thing to say is “Yes, Lord,” or words to that effect. Assume that you are going to agree with what you hear.

But having said that, when Ananias was told of the encounter he was to have with this dangerous man in town, his next response was effectively “But, Lord—!” He was going to correct his Master, inform the Lord of things he apparently didn’t know. And I think it’s helpful to have both “Yes, Lord,” and “But, Lord!” in our prayers. We do believe and respond, and we assume that what we are told is appropriate for us. But we may also have hard questions. “What are you thinking? How can this possibly make sense?” The Lord receives both, and ministers to us both in our word of obedience and in our questions.

We can identify with Ananias. For most of us there are dangerous people, groups, or ideas that cause us anxiety. “Don’t send me *there!*” So let’s put ourselves in Ananias’ shoes: “Saul of Tarsus has come with legal documents enabling him to capture believers and take them to Jerusalem to be jailed or killed. This is a dangerous man guilty of terrible crimes in the past and intent on more. If I go and pray for him and his seeing is restored, who is the first individual he will find in his focus? Me!”

Who are the dangerous people you recoil from? Religious hucksters who prey on the weak? The self-anointed and intolerant who kill for the sake of God or racial purity or tribal honor? Hard souls who worship money and promote its worship everywhere? Public philosophers who trash life and beauty in the name of choice or privacy or freedom?

What else can we learn from Ananias’ prayer? The first time he was told, “Go to Straight Street,” he objected: “Wait a minute, I don’t want to go there.” But then the Lord said, “Go!” He intended this prayer to lead to obedience. Ananias would come to understand God’s plans by obeying rather than by a discussion that removed every uncertainty.

Further, we observe the Lord tell Ananias that this man, Saul of Tarsus, had a unique role to play (as the apostle Paul). He was the Lord’s “chosen instrument.” He would suffer terribly. Even in his violent past he had been fitted for something extraordinary. “I have chosen him, I have plans for him, and that’s all you need to know.”

As I noted before, Ananias’ ministry here is one of the pivots in the history of the gospel and therefore the history of the world. Paul would write almost half of the New Testament, found churches around the Roman world, and articulate more forcefully than anyone else how the gospel has meaning outside Judaism. He would speak not only to Jews but to cultures everywhere in the world of the ways of God. His words would penetrate Europe, Asia, and eventually Africa and every other place. He would break the Christian gospel free from one culture and offered it to all cultures so that people like us, most of whom are not Jewish, have the opportunity to hear in persuasive terms that Jesus loves us. Nobody would articulate it more clearly. Nobody’s record of preaching would be better preserved. Nobody’s insights into the ways of God would be deeper than this man’s.

And Ananias was there on the day when Paul was baptized into Christ and given an opportunity to begin the life that would change everything. Ananias was an ordinary man, yet he was given the privilege of participating in something extraordinary.

Another observation we can make is that important events occurred before Ananias entered the story, events of which he had no knowledge. The Scriptures say that the good works we are to walk in are ones that have been prepared ahead of time for us. Ananias didn’t know that the persecutor had now become a man deeply troubled in prayer, longing to hear a word of encouragement. But Ananias only needed reassurance that God knew the greater plan.

The last thing we can observe about this text is Ananias’ tenderness and risky love. He touched the man to heal him. He called him “brother.” He baptized him and welcomed him from the heart. He didn’t hold back.

Moving from Ananias' story, a second lesson about prayer leading to a heart for the lost is found in Acts 10.

An unpleasant assignment

In chapter 9 we read the account of an enemy being folded into the family of God, first by a miraculous vision, and then by the ministry of a believer. Chapter 10 has the same pattern. It tells the story of Cornelius, a Roman centurion who stood across a chasm of resentment and defilement in the thinking of Jewish Christians. Ordinary friendship with Gentiles was impossible for Jews. But this Gentile was loved by God, and the apostle Peter was called on by God to act as Ananias did. Acts 10:9b-15:

Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

Then in a bit this transpired in verses 19-22:

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and god-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say."

Peter's problem was not so much with danger as with discomfort. He didn't want to go into Cornelius' home, until Jesus persuaded him that "what I have called clean you must not call unclean."

We can identify with Peter's reaction if we put it in slightly different terms. Places like prisons, rescue missions, homeless shelters, AIDS wards, drug centers, the streets where throw-away young people or poor immigrants gather, are usually distasteful. There's likely to be bad health, coarse language, dark music. Such places are uncomfortable for us. But what Peter would find when he went to this distasteful place was a gentle, kindhearted, God-loving Gentile.

At the other end of the spectrum, gatherings of the powerful can also be morally distasteful: a glitzy marketing convention in Las Vegas, a political fundraiser, a black-tie gala encouraging greed, an out-of-control party. Those occasions may have associations for you that are unrighteous. How could God send you there? But God may send his own to such places as well, and what he has called clean we have no right to call unclean.

So with both men, Ananias and Peter, we find that the servants of God needed to be taught to see what was otherwise not apparent.

How can we learn the lessons of Peter and Ananias?

“You were bought with a price”

First of all, we wouldn't hear of resistance in these men if it weren't hard for everybody to go beyond what is comfortable.

We also need to remember our own dependence on God's grace. What God has called clean, we should not regard as unclean. It's not our background and our culture and our good religion that we benefit from; it's the word of God that cleanses us. We are just like the ones we might recoil from. We too would do dangerous and wicked things if God were not kind and merciful, if he had not given us what we don't deserve.

Cervantes' great work *Don Quixote* has been retold for the contemporary stage in the musical *Man from La Mancha*. It is the story of an old man who is probably crazy, although the question of who truly sees the world as it is, is central to the story. This old man believes himself to be a knight, a figure of grand nobility and purpose, fighting for truth, upholding justice. He has a servant he names his squire, and together they battle windmills—imaginary giants. They live brave and noble lives. In the story there is a barmaid, who is also a prostitute, named Aldonza. The knight is convinced that she is Lady Dulcinea, his one true love. He addresses her only as Dulcinea—a beautiful, noble, woman of high station. When she hears him speak that way, it's like water on parched ground. Her longing to be whom he sees her to be is very strong.

Ordinary Christians, royal sons and daughters, live with stature that is invisible—nobility, purpose, and beauty from God's indwelling presence. The mission of Ananias and Peter was to extend the identity-changing power of the gospel, which transforms an Aldonza to a Dulcinea, into the lives of people who would otherwise have no hope. Like these two men, we gain the willingness to reach out from time spent in prayer.

Let me conclude with just a couple more observations about the prayers that broke down barriers for Ananias and Peter. First, what changed their minds was not a weekend retreat on evangelism. It was not even Bible teaching. It was ultimately time spent hearing Jesus speak of what mattered to him. Gaining the mind of Christ in prayer motivates us to seek outsiders.

Second, think again about Ananias as an apostle-maker. All we know about him is that he was a good man, devoted and godly. And it's authenticity that makes witness powerful. It's authenticity that lets you give away what you've been given. What the blind man needed was someone who knew Jesus well enough to put his arm around him and say with sincerity, “Brother Saul, receive your sight and be baptized in the name of Jesus.”

Prayer should lead to adventure. We are supposed to be folks who not only withdraw to pray but advance because of prayer. Remember C. T. Studd's rhyming mission statement:

“Some like to dwell within the sound of church and chapel bell—
I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell.”

Jesus also had a succinct mission statement, if you will, expressing his understanding of who he was and what he was doing: “The Son of man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). If we are his intimates, we will find ourselves uncomfortable merely enjoying the world of church and chapel bell. To seek the dangerous and unclean is to be the companion of Christ.

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