

For Dr. Skinner's video on this lesson [click here](#)

**You will be my witnesses...**

### **In Jerusalem: Saul and Ananias (Acts 9:1-20)**

When we first meet Saul in the book of Acts, he both witnesses Stephen's martyrdom (7:58) and approves of it (8:1). We next meet Saul in chapter 9 and learn that he is still "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (9:1). Moreover, Saul has an ambitious new plan. He wants to travel to Damascus in Syria to round up more Christians, arrest them, and bring them back to Jerusalem (9:2).

God, however, has other equally ambitious plans. What happens next is one of the most well-known stories in Acts. On the road to Damascus, Saul is knocked down by a bright light and struck blind. Jesus calls to him and asks Saul why he is persecuting him and then instructs him to get up and go to Damascus where he will be told what to do. Unable to see, Saul's companions lead him to Damascus (9:3-8). The archenemy of the church has been brought low, his world turned upside down.

- Have you ever had a road-to-Damascus, a "was blind but now I see" kind of experience where you came to see Jesus in a new way? What was that experience like for you?

Skinner notes that most of the attention over the years has focused on the first part of the story. But the story isn't over yet. A second lesser known part of the story is yet to unfold, what Skinner calls a Go-To-Straight-Street experience. A disciple by the name of Ananias is in Damascus and now the Lord appears to him and tells him to go to Straight Street to find Saul and heal him (9:10-12). Like prophets before him, Ananias argues this is a bad idea. Saul is the last person any Christian would want to go and see (9:13-14). But the Lord insists and Ananias goes (15-16).

- Read Exodus 4:1-7; Isaiah 6:1-11, and Jeremiah 1:4-10 to hear the call stories of other prophets and their initial responses to God's call. Why do you think initial resistance to God's call is so often a mark of a true prophet? What risks does Ananias run by agreeing to go and heal Saul?

Skinner notes that if the only purpose of this story is the conversion of Saul, then Ananias wouldn't have been necessary. But he is necessary. Skinner writes, "Saul is not only being brought out of something (his old ways and understandings). He's also being brought into something (a new identity woven into the communal existence of Jesus' church)." Ananias is the link to the new community. He will be able to testify to Saul's transformation and what's more, he'll be able to testify

that this transformation is God's doing. Perhaps the most amazing part of this story occurs when Ananias arrives in Straight Street and greets Saul as "Brother Saul" (9:17). The gospel is for all people, even former enemies. The story of Saul's conversion and Ananias' embrace of this former enemy as a brother in Christ is a reminder to the church that no one is ever outside of God's reach.

- Why is Ananias's addressing of Saul as "brother" significant? When, if ever, have you recognized someone you initially regarded as a stranger, outsider, or even an enemy as a fellow member of God's family? How easy or difficult did that recognition come, and what happened as a result?
- "It's easier to talk about the new possibilities the good news brings," writes Skinner, "than it is to live into them wholeheartedly like Ananias does." When have you seen Christians, individually or as a group, embracing God's "new possibilities"? How did others respond?

### **In all Judea: Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1-48)**

Cornelius is a commander in the Roman army and a God-fearer who was known for his generosity and prayer life (10:1-2). God-fearers were people who had come to faith in Israel's God but had not formally converted to Judaism. As of yet, the apostles have not reached out with the good news to any Gentiles and so God once again takes the initiative (10:3).

The story unfolds slowly in part because what is happening here is significant. Remember that with the exception of the Ethiopian court official (see below), the church is made up of folks who are Jewish and they are following the Mosaic Law. This move into Gentile territory will upend this and it will take time for the church to catch up to the Spirit and to what God is doing.

The story begins with two visions, one by Cornelius in which God tells him to invite Peter to his home (10:3-6). The second is a vision that Peter has. In his vision, Peter sees a sheet full of animals and he is told to eat. But some of these animals are unclean by Mosaic Law and Peter refuses. But God insists, saying, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (10:16). Even while Peter was still trying to make sense of the vision, Cornelius' men arrive with an invitation for Peter to come to Caesarea and the Spirit tells Peter to go (10:17-20). The next day the men set off and return to Cornelius' house.

- The man in Cornelius' vision tells Cornelius that God has heard his prayers. How much or how little would taking seriously the idea that God hears all people's prayers shape the way you pray?
- How does the vision that Peter sees prepare him for his visit to Cornelius, a Roman centurion and a Gentile?

The story then stops for just a moment to remind readers why what's about to happen is so significant. Peter explains to those assembled that Jewish law does not allow Jews to associate, visit, or share hospitality with Gentiles without becoming ritually unclean. But, Peter acknowledges, times and customs are changing (10:28) and he willingly enters Cornelius' home and accepts his hospitality.

- “Long-standing boundaries that Peter had internalized since his childhood,” writes Skinner, “are suddenly no longer in force.” What boundaries between and distinctions among people has your faith led you to reevaluate? What conclusions about these boundaries and distinctions have you reached, and why?

Peter and Cornelius take turns sharing their stories with each other. After hearing Cornelius speak of his experience Peter is able to say “I truly understand that God shows no partiality” (10:34). Peter then begins to share with the assembled household the good news of Jesus. But even before he can finish, the Holy Spirit descends upon Cornelius and household (10:44). Recognizing that the *same* Spirit has been poured out on these Gentiles, Peter baptizes Cornelius and his household.

One can sense throughout this story, the waves of understanding that wash over Peter as he grapples to understand what Jesus meant at the ascension when he told the disciples they were to be his witnesses. The circle of people being invited into this new community is ever-widening. Truly God shows no partiality.

- Skinner states, “the basic belief set down in this story is that there are no qualitative differences among various kinds of Christians. No one group enjoys an inherent advantage over another. The church doesn't have a minor league team or a remedial class.” In your experience, how well does the church – in general and in our congregation – reflect this basic belief in its practice? When have you seen it honor this conviction, and when have you seen this conviction contradicted?

### **And to the ends of the earth: The Ethiopian Court Official (Acts 8:26-40)**

Although I've placed this story last in the lesson, it actually occurs before the other two, right on the heels of the story of the conversion of the Samaritans. It once again features Philip who is told to head south on a wilderness road where he will encounter an official serving in the court of the Nubian Queen.

Here's some background information that may be of help in making sense of the story.

- The text identifies the man as an Ethiopian. In this case, Ethiopia refers to a region south of Egypt and is elsewhere called Nubia or Cush. The Romans would've considered Nubia the edge of the civilized world.
- The text also identifies the court official as a eunuch. A eunuch may simply be the term used to describe any court official. But most likely it means that the man had been castrated. As a eunuch, the man would've experienced contempt and mockery from society and would no longer have been considered a man.

Skinner highlights several interesting facets of this story. First, the official doesn't fit easily into any pre-constructed categories. On the one hand, he has some power. He clearly has wealth – he owns a chariot and a copy of the scroll of Isaiah (8:28). But on the other hand he lacks power and respect. He is educated, literate, and probably familiar with Judaism (he was on his way home after worshipping in Jerusalem – see 8:27). But he also needs help making sense of the Isaiah passage he is reading. As a eunuch he is genderless, neither male nor female. (Read Deuteronomy 23:1 to see how the Old Testament viewed eunuchs.) In all these ways, this Ethiopian official represents the ends of the earth. Not just the geographical ends of the earth, but the social and cultural ends too.

- When have you been surprised to discover that you share something in common with a stranger or outsider? How did this common ground affect your relationship with this person?
- When have you needed another person to guide you as you read Scripture? What do we gain from reading Scripture with other people that we cannot gain when we read it by ourselves?

Skinner also points out, that we never hear what Philip says to the court official. The text only reports that Philip shared the good news of Jesus with him (8:35). But we do get to hear the court official's theological thoughts. While driving along, he sees some water and asks, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" (8:36) The answer, of course, is nothing. He may be a new sibling in Christ but he already is able to discern the activity of God in the world and he knows that there is a place in the new Jesus community for him.

- Skinner relates how he has discovered that this story is important "for people who have been denied power, dignity, and a place at the table in Christian history." How is this story good news for such people?
- As you think about the make-up of our congregation, who are the people that are missing in worship? Serving on committees? In leadership positions? What are some things that we can do to help make room for these missing ones?