



WHERE LIFE & PURPOSE CONNECT

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of March 17, 2024

Weekly Prayer

Loving God, I want to be a living example of Your love in our world. Let me learn to be content in all circumstances of my life, treating others with compassion and respect and settling differences with love and integrity. Open my heart to your ongoing presence so that I may grow in faithfulness and love and bring honor to Your name. Amen.

Monday, March 18

Scripture: Acts 7:54-8:3, 9:1-2

Once the council members heard these words, they were enraged and began to grind their teeth at Stephen. But Stephen, enabled by the Holy Spirit, stared into heaven and saw God's majesty and Jesus standing at God's right side. He exclaimed, "Look! I can see heaven on display and the Human One standing at God's right side!" At this, they shrieked and covered their ears. Together, they charged at him, threw him out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses placed their coats in the care of a young man named Saul. As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, accept my life!" Falling to his knees, he shouted, "Lord, don't hold this sin against them!" Then he died.

Saul was in full agreement with Stephen's murder.

At that time, the church in Jerusalem began to be subjected to vicious harassment. Everyone except the apostles was scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. Some pious men buried Stephen and deeply grieved over him. Saul began to wreak havoc against the church. Entering one house after another, he would drag off both men and women and throw them into prison.

Meanwhile, Saul was still spewing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest, seeking letters to the synagogues in Damascus. If he found persons who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, these letters would authorize him to take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Observation

A man with the Hebrew name Saul first appeared in the book of Acts as almost a bit player, holding other people's coats. He quickly became prominent as a driven, deadly

persecutor of early Christians. Tomorrow we'll read a longer account of his testimony at a trial later in his life. At that time, he said, "I really thought that I ought to oppose the name of Jesus the Nazarene in every way possible" (Acts 26:9, also Galatians 1:14).

Application

In Saul's background and education, nearly every person he respected, from the high priest down, rejected Jesus and saw Christians as a threat to God's truth. No wonder he set out, with great passion, to destroy a faith he saw as seriously wrong. Did your background and training make it easy or hard for you to believe in Jesus? How well are you able to understand and relate to people with backgrounds different from yours?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, your life offered all of us grace and a place with a God who loves relentlessly. Help me never to distort that message by denying grace to people who aren't just like me. Amen.

Tuesday, March 19

Scripture: Acts 22:3-5, 26:4-11

Paul continued, "I'm a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia but raised in this city. Under Gamaliel's instruction, I was trained in the strict interpretation of our ancestral Law. I am passionately loyal to God, just like you who are gathered here today. I harassed those who followed this Way to their death, arresting and delivering both men and women into prison. The high priest and the whole Jerusalem Council can testify about me. I received letters from them, addressed to our associates in Damascus, then went there to bring those who were arrested to Jerusalem so they could be punished.

Every Jew knows the way of life I have followed since my youth because, from the beginning, I was among my people and in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time. If they wanted to, they could testify that I followed the way of life set out by the most exacting group of our religion. I am a Pharisee. Today I am standing trial because of the hope in the promise God gave our ancestors. This is the promise our twelve tribes hope to receive as they earnestly worship night and day. The Jews are accusing me, King Agrippa, because of this hope! Why is it inconceivable to you that God raises the dead? "I really thought that I ought to oppose the name of Jesus the Nazarene in every way possible. ¹And that's exactly what I did in Jerusalem. I locked up many of God's holy people in prison under the authority of the chief priests. When they were condemned to death, I voted against them. ¹In one synagogue after another—indeed, in all the synagogues—I would often torture them, compelling them to slander God. My rage bordered on the hysterical as I pursued them, even to foreign cities.

Observation

Saul's father and mother were part of the Jewish diaspora, living in Tarsus, a major city in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Tarsus was an important intellectual center. It is

likely that young Saul, whose Roman name was Paul, received instruction at the Greco-Roman primary and grammar schools of Tarsus up to the age of thirteen before being sent to study in Jerusalem. He may have studied the Law, both written and oral, under Gamaliel I, one of the leading first-century rabbis, up to the age of twenty.

Application

Evidence suggests that Saul was a young man on the rise. He likely expected influence and comfort as a religious leader in Jerusalem. It was Paul's ambition, combined with his unwavering religious convictions, that may have led him to the work of persecuting the fledgling Christian movement. How can ambition, often a positive quality, lead to choosing a life path that you might later regret?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of relationship that doesn't depend on my successes. Help me to live into the covenant you have made based on your unconditional love for your people. Amen.

Wednesday, March 20

Scripture: Acts 9:3-9, 26:12-18

During the journey, as he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven encircled him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice asking him, "Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?" Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus, whom you are harassing," came the reply. "Now get up and enter the city. You will be told what you must do." Those traveling with him stood there speechless; they heard the voice but saw no one. After they picked Saul up from the ground, he opened his eyes but he couldn't see. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind and neither ate nor drank anything.

"On one such journey, I was going to Damascus with the full authority of the chief priests. While on the road at midday, King Agrippa, I saw a light from heaven shining around me and my traveling companions. That light was brighter than the sun. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice that said to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me? It's hard for you to kick against a spear.' Then I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord replied, 'I am Jesus, whom you are harassing. Get up! Stand on your feet! I have appeared to you for this purpose: to appoint you as my servant and witness of what you have seen and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to open their eyes. Then they can turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, and receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are made holy by faith in me.'

Observation

Scholar N. T. Wright said devout Pharisees meditated at times on Ezekiel 1's vision (which showed God coming across the desert to Hebrew exiles in Babylon). What if Saul was doing that as he rode? Imagine his excitement as, in the depth of devout meditation, he

saw with the eyes of his heart, so real that it seemed as though he was seeing it with his ordinary physical eyes, and then so real that he realized he was seeing it with his physical eyes, the form, the fire, the blazing light, and—the face! And the face was the face of Jesus of Nazareth.

Application

Paul did not treat his meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus as “just a vision,” an illusory, inward incident. He believed he’d met the risen Christ just as “really” as any other apostle (1 Corinthians 15:5-9). It was so significant that Paul told (and Luke reported) two additional versions of it (Acts 22:3–16; 26:9–18). What evidence or experiences have most strongly led you to share Paul’s faith that Jesus is truly alive, and to order your life around that faith?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, even when I resist your direction for my life, you don’t give up on me. Thank you for the times, large or small, when your “goading” has moved me to a more positive way of life. Amen.

Thursday, March 21

Scripture: Acts 9:10-18, 22:12-16

In Damascus there was a certain disciple named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, “Ananias!” He answered, “Yes, Lord.” The Lord instructed him, “Go to Judas’ house on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias enter and put his hands on him to restore his sight.” Ananias countered, “Lord, I have heard many reports about this man. People say he has done horrible things to your holy people in Jerusalem. He’s here with authority from the chief priests to arrest everyone who calls on your name.” The Lord replied, “Go! This man is the agent I have chosen to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” Ananias went to the house. He placed his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord sent me—Jesus, who appeared to you on the way as you were coming here. He sent me so that you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Instantly, flakes fell from Saul’s eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized.

“There was a certain man named Ananias. According to the standards of the Law, he was a pious man who enjoyed the respect of all the Jews living there. He came and stood beside me. ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ he said. Instantly, I regained my sight and I could see him. He said, ‘The God of our ancestors has selected you to know his will, to see the righteous one, and to hear his voice. You will be his witness to everyone concerning what you have seen and heard. What are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized, and wash away your sins as you call on his name.’

Observation

In music, we sometimes refer to a particular singer or band as a “one-hit wonder.” There are Bible characters who, somewhat similarly, only make one appearance in the Bible story, and yet play a deeply significant role. One of them was a Christian in Damascus named Ananias. He knew Saul’s reputation for persecuting Christians yet obeyed (not without some fear) a divine directive to go and pray for Saul. Imagine the courage it must have taken for Ananias to confront Paul the inquisitor.

Application

Acts 9 talked about Ananias bravely going to a man who had come to town to imprison, maybe even kill, him. When on trial, in Acts 22, Paul remembered that Ananias was eager to get him baptized, despite his track record of violently opposing Christians. Has God ever called you to do something good that nevertheless scared you and called for some courage? If God called you to an “Ananias” mission today, how easy, or hard do you believe it would be for you to respond?

Prayer

Lord, if Ananias had said “no,” he would have missed the chance to be part of a historically great moment. Help me not to miss your call, or to fail to answer. Amen.

Friday, March 22

Scripture: Acts 9:20-25, 28-30; Galatians 1:11-12, 15-23, 2:1-2

Right away, he began to preach about Jesus in the synagogues. “He is God’s Son,” he declared. Everyone who heard him was baffled. They questioned each other, “Isn’t he the one who was wreaking havoc among those in Jerusalem who called on this name? Hadn’t he come here to take those same people as prisoners to the chief priests?” But Saul grew stronger and stronger. He confused the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

After this had gone on for some time, the Jews hatched a plot to kill Saul. However, he found out about their scheme. They were keeping watch at the city gates around the clock so they could assassinate him. But his disciples took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the city wall.

After this, Saul moved freely among the disciples in Jerusalem and was speaking with confidence in the name of the Lord. He got into debates with the Greek-speaking Jews as well, but they tried to kill him. When the family of believers learned about this, they escorted him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Brothers and sisters, I want you to know that the gospel I preached isn’t human in origin. I didn’t receive it or learn it from a human. It came through a revelation from Jesus Christ.

But God had set me apart from birth and called me through his grace. He was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might preach about him to the Gentiles. I didn't immediately consult with any human being. I didn't go up to Jerusalem to see the men who were apostles before me either, but I went away into Arabia and I returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. But I didn't see any other of the apostles except James the brother of the Lord. Before God, I'm not lying about the things that I'm writing to you! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, but I wasn't known personally by the Christian churches in Judea. They only heard a report about me: "The man who used to harass us now preaches the faith that he once tried to destroy."

Then after fourteen years I went up to Jerusalem again with Barnabas, and I took Titus along also. I went there because of a revelation, and I laid out the gospel that I preach to the Gentiles for them. But I did it privately with the influential leaders to make sure that I wouldn't be working or that I hadn't worked for nothing.

Observation

As the apostle Paul wrote to Christians in the province of Galatia, he spoke of three years in Arabia and Damascus, and then a fourteen-year gap. It's hard to exactly match those time periods in the way Luke told Paul's story in Acts. (Luke did show the shift from the Hebrew "Saul" to the Greek name "Paul" in Acts 13:9.)

Application

Paul began to preach "right away" (Acts 9:20). Yet it took years (in Arabia, Tarsus, Damascus) to think through how his rabbinic Scripture learning fit with the stunning reality of meeting the risen Jesus before he could write masterworks like Galatians or Romans. Why are both the core good news about Jesus and careful thought and study of how to apply that faith vital to your Christian walk?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, in so many ways your truth is simple. But the world I live in, with all its beauty and brokenness, raises many questions about how to apply your truth in my complicated life. Guide me as you guided the apostle Paul. Amen.

Saturday, March 23

Scripture: Acts 4:36-37, 9:26-28, 11:19-26

Joseph, whom the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (that is, "one who encourages"), was a Levite from Cyprus. He owned a field, sold it, brought the money, and placed it in the care and under the authority of the apostles.

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him. They didn't believe he was really a disciple. Then Barnabas brought Saul to the apostles and told them the story about how Saul saw the Lord on the way and that the

Lord had spoken to Saul. He also told them about the confidence with which Saul had preached in the name of Jesus in Damascus. After this, Saul moved freely among the disciples in Jerusalem and was speaking with confidence in the name of the Lord.

Now those who were scattered as a result of the trouble that occurred because of Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. They proclaimed the word only to Jews. Among them were some people from Cyprus and Cyrene. They entered Antioch and began to proclaim the good news about the Lord Jesus also to Gentiles. The Lord's power was with them, and a large number came to believe and turned to the Lord. When the church in Jerusalem heard about this, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw evidence of God's grace, he was overjoyed and encouraged everyone to remain fully committed to the Lord. Barnabas responded in this way because he was a good man, whom the Holy Spirit had endowed with exceptional faith. A considerable number of people were added to the Lord. Barnabas went to Tarsus in search of Saul. When he found him, he brought him to Antioch. They were there for a whole year, meeting with the church and teaching large numbers of people. It was in Antioch where the disciples were first labeled "Christians."

Observation

Two days ago, we read about the only time the Bible mentioned Ananias. Another person mentioned far more than once, played a major role in Paul's story: Joseph (nicknamed "Barnabas" = one who encourages). The nickname stuck, clearly because it fit the man so well. The apostle Paul brought immense talents and conviction to his mission of preaching Jesus to the Mediterranean world. But without Barnabas, Paul might have lived out his days making tents in Tarsus. It was Barnabas who believed in Paul when he first came to Jerusalem. It was Barnabas who introduced him to the apostles. It was Barnabas who found him during the in-between years and brought him to Antioch.

Application

Acts 9:26-28 says Judean Christians first accepted Paul because they trusted Barnabas, who vouched for Paul's honesty. How can you be a "Barnabas," helping others do the ministry work God calls them to? Scholar N. T. Wright told how Barnabas and Paul's work in Antioch, a diverse city, linked Christ's disciples to his name: "There the word 'Christian' first came into use. It was a nickname... just as 'Methodist' was at first a word used by the opponents of Wesley and his friends to sneer at their 'Methodical' ways of organizing their Bible study and prayer groups. Like many nicknames, it tells us a lot about the popular perception of what was going on. You would hear every language... in Antioch... but the one you could guarantee to be understood was... Greek. 'Christ'... was the Greek word for 'Messiah,'... 'God's anointed king.' Jesus' followers were thinking and speaking in such a way that they were called 'the king's people,' 'Messianists,' Christians." Are you grateful to be able to bear the name "Christian," with all it implies?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, it is because you are "the Christ" (God's anointed king) that I am a Christian. You are my king, and I look forward to spending eternity with you. Amen.