

May 16, 2021
So Wrapped Up in Something ...
Acts 9:1-20

Frederick Mayer was a German-born Jew who emigrated to the United States, just before World War 2. His family in Germany were sent to concentration camps. After Pearl Harbor, he joined the US Army. Since he spoke German fluently, he was attached to the Office of Strategic Services, spies who worked behind enemy lines to provide intelligence. In February 1945, Mayer parachuted into the Austrian Alps. Mayer posed as a German officer, living in the barracks in Innsbruck, radioing out his intelligence.

Eventually, Mayer was betrayed by a friend and arrested. Despite brutal beatings and torture, he never gave up the names of his associates, maintaining he was working alone. Another captured agent was shown Mayer's photo. Knowing quite well Mayer was only a sergeant, the agent convinced the SS that Mayer was a senior officer, who could only be interrogated by the regional governor, Franz Hofer. Posing as an officer, Mayer negotiated with Hofer for the surrender of German forces in Innsbruck. In an ironic twist, German troops surrendered to an American sergeant, a Jewish emigrant from Germany. Claudia "Lady Bird" Johnson, wife of President Lyndon B. Johnson, once said, *"Become so wrapped up in something that you forget to be afraid."* For Mayer, the cause he believed in – defeating Nazism – outweighed his fear.

Despite having opportunity for revenge against the Nazis who destroyed his family and tortured him personally, Mayer chose to forgive those who killed his family and abused him. Mayer attributed his ability to forgive to his belief in a loving God, something infinitely more important than fear.

Two weeks ago, we discussed Stephen. He chose to stay faithful to Jesus, even as rocks were flying at him. Wrapped up in his faith in Jesus, he seemed to forget to be afraid. That took incredible courage. Wrapped up in the love of Jesus, he chose to forgive his persecutors. That took tremendous courage. Could you have done that?

We read that, *"Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen. A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria ... Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out men and women to throw them into prison" (8:1-3).* As time passes, *"Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them, both men and women, back to Jerusalem in chains" (9:1-2).* Do you get a picture of who Saul is?

What happens next? *"As Saul was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, 'Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?' 'Who are you, lord?' Saul asked. And the voice replied, 'I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'* The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the voice but saw no one! Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he was blind. So, his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink" (9:3-9).

Now He is literally lightning-bolted from his saddle. The person/cause he had devoted his life to destroying – Jesus – blinds him with His presence. Like every faithful Jew, Saul has yearned for the coming of the Messiah. That is his driving passion. Now that promise of God's Messiah is suddenly proven to be fulfilled in Jesus. Imagine the confusion. The fear. The panic. His whole world is turned on its head.

The other person in the story

We know lots about Saul/Paul (see Tom Wright's great book, *Paul: A Biography*). Let's focus on the other person in this passage – the unsung hero – Ananias.

Jesus appears to Ananias, one of the followers of Jesus in Damascus, in a vision: *"Ananias! Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now. I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so he can see again" (9:11-12).* Ananias knows Saul's reputation and he knows the reason Saul is coming to Damascus. After all, it isn't every day the high priest gives authority to a young hothead to raid synagogues in a far-off town in a foreign country. News like that travels fast. Most believers in Damascus have probably already fled town. As one of the few remaining followers of Jesus in town, Ananias knows he is top on Saul's hit list for arrest and perhaps worse.

It's not surprising that Ananias questions Jesus: *"But Lord, I've heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name" (9:13-14).* I'd ask God for sober second thought, too. Putting myself in Ananias' shoes, I can imagine the terror. This is probably just some new trick Saul has schemed up.

The Lord says to Ananias, *"Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel" (9:15-16).* What happens?

With fear and trepidation, Ananias goes. Remember Claudia Johnson's counsel: *"Become so wrapped up in something that you forget to be afraid."* The love of God, revealed in Jesus, is a cause that, when we are wrapped up in it, is bigger than his fear. Ananias finds the house. He knocks on the door. Ananias finds Saul alone, blind, and

helpless. In one of the most moving scenes in Scripture, Ananias greets this vile man: "*Brother Saul!*" Brother? Remember WHO Saul is! Ananias, despite fear and revulsion for Saul, chooses to have faith that God's Spirit can, in fact, totally transform a person – even a vicious, evil person like Saul. And so, out of obedience, he chooses to love Saul.

From the very start, followers of Jesus saw themselves as "family" – children of God our Father, brothers and sisters in Christ. This was in a world where "family" means a lot more than it does to most of us now. Being a brother/sister means we share the deepest of all bonds – blood (the blood of Jesus) – the deepest of loyalties – to the family name (the name of Jesus) – and the deepest of all loves (the love of Jesus) – nothing and no one can destroy that family bond. As Saul/Paul himself, will express it later, as children of God – family – "*there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Galatians 3:26-28).

Ananias acts with courage. His courage shows itself in obedience to God and in love for Saul. He says "*Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit*" (9:17). He lays his hands upon Saul, "*instantly something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized*" (9:18).

Who is this unsung hero, Ananias, who risks his life to go to Saul. To pray over Saul? To embrace Saul as family? We don't know much about him. He is mentioned nowhere else. We don't know how he became a follower of Jesus. We don't know if he was a leader of the church in Damascus, or just an "ordinary" disciple, going about an ordinary life, with an ordinary occupation, and an ordinary family. We know nothing about his life after he meets Saul. All we know is in these few verses. That's enough.

We know Ananias was a follower of Jesus. Ananias was a person whose primary identity is a follower of Jesus. It defines who he is and how he acts even in very challenging situations. In his world where, if I chose to identify myself as a follower of Jesus, I would expect REAL persecution and suffering, this takes real courage.

We know Ananias was prepared to follow Jesus even when it seems ridiculously dangerous. These days we have a certain Christian-privilege: we assume that, as believers, we have the right to freedom of religion (at worst), and even privilege in a "Christian" country (at best). That was not the case in Ananias' world. It's not the case in most of the world today – in the Middle East/North Africa, India, SE Asia, Indonesia, or China. Seeing the bluster of some Christians today, it might be worth learning our history. To follow Jesus has nothing to do with claiming rights; it's all about following Jesus courageously, faithfully, and obediently, even in hard places. Following Jesus means loving our neighbour as ourselves. That may move us way out of our comfort zone. That was true for Ananias. It will be true for Saul, as well.

"Become so wrapped up in something that you forget to be afraid." Courage is not the

absence of fear, but rather the decision that something else is more important than fear. Ananias is so wrapped in some **ONE** – Jesus – he believes so much in the person of Jesus, the presence of Jesus, and the transformative power of the Spirit of Jesus – that (like Daniel) he is willing to walk into the lion’s den.

We know Ananias obeyed with love, grace, and mercy. No one would blame Ananias for saying “no!” to God. No one would blame him for attacking Saul. Instead of taking revenge, Ananias chooses to embrace Saul. Ananias is so wrapped up in his faith in Jesus, his faith in Jesus is so important, that he can do the impossible. He welcomes Saul. He forgives Saul. That is only possible through the power of Jesus.

Have you ever experienced that kind of grace? Has someone welcomed you as a “brother” or “sister” when you didn’t deserve it?

Who needs that kind of welcome from us? Are there people in our families, at work, among our acquaintances who – for whatever reasons – we’d like nothing to do with? Perhaps they have hurt us – badly? Do they need our mercy, forgiveness, and love? That kind of love is not a nice, sweet emotion. It’s hard work. It takes courage. It takes a commitment to Someone – to Jesus – more important than fear or hate.

Ananias’ shows us that, when we’re wrapped up in the love of Jesus and the mission of Jesus, we can reach out in love and compassion, even when it seems impossible.

C.S Lewis gives us some very practical advice: *"Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone you will presently come to love him."* That was the kind of practical, courageous love Jesus modelled. His love was all about action. He loved us so much that while we were still sinners, He died on the cross for us. That was the kind of practical, courageous love Ananias modelled. He didn’t bother about if he “loved” Saul. He took action. This is the kind of practical, courageous love we are called to model, as well: just do it.

Ananias stepped out in faith and helped Saul, for a few minutes: the ripple effects, as Saul thrived, changed the world. We assume Ananias quietly kept on serving Jesus. A war hero, Frederick Mayer, received his medals. Significantly, he went on to spend his golden years as a Meals on Wheels volunteer simply loving his neighbours in Charles Town, West Virginia (population 5000). Can I be so wrapped up in the love of Jesus I am willing to step out in faith and do something? It may not be a big, heroic act. It may be a prayer. A call. Practical help. Encouragement. Any act of kindness will do. You can make a difference in one life. Who knows what the ripple effects will be?