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Acts 9

Ananias

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Let's have a word of prayer: "Father in Heaven, these dear people have taken time. They've prepared and they've come to church. I pray Heavenly Father that they will not be disappointed, I pray that their hearts will be warmed by Your love, touched by Your grace, influenced by Your presence and changed for eternity. Oh, Heavenly Father, please be powerful in our midst today. Pour Your Holy Spirit out upon us and teach us through Your Word, teach us things we've never seen or understood before or things we've known but forgotten. Help us Heavenly Father please. And I pray that everyone here will hear exactly what they need to hear. And that all of us respond and that all of us Heavenly Father will be affected as only we can be when You minister to us. We pray and ask this in Jesus' name, Amen."

October 24, 1972 I turned 18, and immediately I headed for the US Coastguard Recruiter in Grand Rapids Michigan. I was sworn in on the 29th of October and became a part of the Coastguard – went to boot camp, that was easy. I was in the good shape physically. In fact, I enjoyed the discipline and marching and all that. It was great, I loved it. Then came time for our education; they offered a number of schools and I was excited because I had qualified for any school they had. I wanted to be aviation, electronic technician, but I found out I am color blind and they wouldn't allow me. Because they said, you'll hook the white wire up to the green wire and you'll blow the helicopter up. And so I couldn't get any school that I wanted it, and that was the purpose I went in.

You know, I went into the service because I wasn't ready for college, didn't really know what I wanted to do. But I wanted to travel, wanted to have some direction in my life. And besides, I was tired of home, and tired of the small town, and all that, and wanted some adventure. And here was an opportunity. And then it was all taken away because I am color blind. The only thing they offered that was mildly interesting to me, it was being an engineman. So I went to 14 weeks of engineman A school, it was called back then. I hated every minute of it. I just didn't like it.

And then after that I got sent to the US Coastguard Cutter Vigilant, and it was stationed in New Bedford, Massachusetts. I was there for about 3 months and this overwhelming sense came upon me. We are now in the late spring of 1973. And I had a hair cut of somebody in the military, but all the kids out in the community had long hair. You know that's the way it was in 1973. We were still fighting over in Vietnam and there was a lot of hostility towards military. I didn't realize that when I went in. But there in the community, they didn't like me. They didn't want me. And I just wanted to be a kid, you know, like they were. I'd go to the park and try to get into the Frisbee tossing game, and they wouldn't have anything to do with me. And then I'd go back to the ship, and there were people – I didn't want to be like them. And so I just felt, just kind of in between and didn't belong anywhere, and all of a sudden this sense came upon me of homesickness.

And you know, that it a well named phrase. It is a sickness. It affects you physically. It hurts when you start being homesick. And you know, I remember thinking, "You know, Mom and Dad weren't so bad, my brother and sisters would be fun to live with again, and even the bully up the street – I am sure we can get along. You just start changing all your attitudes about home, and I was lonely. I was lonely. And one night, I left the ship. They didn't have a phone on the

ship so I had to walk down the pier to the Warfesome place and they had a payphone there. Didn't have cell phones back then, didn't even have answering machines back then. And I put enough coins to get the operator to call collect to Mom and Dad. I would speak to either of them. It didn't matter. I just wanted a voice from home. Phone rang and rang and rang, nobody was there. Oh, I just felt like I needed to talk to somebody, so I popped in a dime or whatever it was, and I called information trying to find the phone number of a fiend I had made that lived in North Carolina. So while we are talking and trying to figure out whether it be under his parent's name or his name and what town he lived in, and on and on. Before it was over, it dawned on me that you know, "This lady has a pretty pleasant voice." And I remember picturing in my mind what she would look like you know, depending on that voice. And before it was over I'd talked to her 20 minutes. And finally she said, "You know I can't do this. I am going to get in trouble with my job." But I just wanted to talk to somebody so bad.

Have you ever been lonely? Maybe you are lonely? I don't know, but I have good news for you. The Bible teaches us that God's grace turns lonely into lovely. I'd like to study that with you today. Please look at Acts chapter 9. We are continuing our series in the Book of Acts. And we are going to pick up the story of Saul. In Acts chapter 9, we will read verses 10 – 19. I have the New King James Version of the Bible. Acts 9, 10-19. Verse 10: "Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias!" And he said, "Here I am, Lord." So the Lord said to him, "arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for the one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight."

"Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." And Ananias went on his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus."

Well for those of you who were not here last week, the story that precedes this part of this story. Saul has gone to the high priest named Caiaphas in Jerusalem. He's asked for letters that give him authority to extradite the criminals, the Christians who were living in Damascus, about 140 miles away from Jerusalem. On that journey, he is encountered by Christ. Jesus appears to him, he is blinded by the flashing light and Saul, we discover in verse 9 spends 3 days without sight. He neither eats nor drinks.

Now I don't know if you thought about this story before, if you've mediated on it, if you tried to understand it? But think about this. You are Judas. It's Judas' house where Saul is staying. Imagine having a guest like this. First of all, he's led by the hand because he can't see. So you bring him in and you take him to the room that you have prepared for him. And he is there, and

you say, “Would you like some water?” “No!” “Can I get you anything?” “No!” “Oh, okay!” And so he is there in the room. You come back a couple of hours later and you say you know, “The Mrs. has prepared some lentil soup. We are ready to sit down for supper, would you like something to eat?” “No!” “Do you want any water?” “No!” For 3 days! What can you do with the guest like that? You can’t give him water; you can’t give him food, how awkward it would be? But there is Saul. I’ll tell you, Saul is a lonely man.

You know he is lonely because of who he is and what he is like. On that journey, he would have been alone. He wouldn’t have walked with the temple police. He was the Pharisee of the Pharisees. He was too good to be with them. So for those 4 or 5 days, he is alone. But even when he wasn’t on that walk, he wanted to be somebody so bad, he was self appointed, self absorbed, self assured, arrogant. People don’t like to be around people like that. He is a lonely man. And for 3 days he can’t see, he doesn’t drink, he doesn’t eat. The Bible says, “He prays.” We’ll talk about that in a moment.

Acts chapter 9 verse 10: “Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias.” When you read a story like this, you ask yourself you know, “What’s in the story, who is in the story?” There are basically 3 people: Ananias, Judas and Saul. And you begin to analyze what their experience is, ask some questions, try to understand it. It’s a little different when you are going to preach about it because you’ve got to come up with something solid. You have to really dig sometimes. It’s a fairly simple story. God speaks to Ananias. He says, “Ananias,” and Ananias says, “Here I am Lord.” And the Lord says, “Ananias I want you to go to a street called Straight to the house of a man named Judas, and inquire about a man named Saul of Tarsus. He is praying, and he has seen you, or he has seen a man named Ananias come and restore his healing.”

Now, Ananias will say, “Lord, wait the minute. I know about this guy, he has letters from the chief priests. He has come to arrest us. He has done a lot of damage to your people in Jerusalem. He is trying to arrest all of us. God, he is the enemy!” And the story goes on, “It’s okay, you go. He is a chosen vessel of Mine; he’s going to bring my name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. And I am going to show him the things he’ll have to suffer for Me.” So Ananias went, enters the house, lays his hand on him and says: “Brother Saul, receive your sight.” And Saul, his eyes, something like scales falls off and he can see. Receives the Holy Spirit, he is baptized, he eats and is refreshed, and he fellowships with the people at Damascus. That’s the story.

So how do you, you know, what do you do with that story? Well you begin looking at the phrases. You begin looking at the names of the people and you begin to try to understand why this story is in the Word of God. Why these people are involved in it, and we’ll begin with Ananias. Ananias is mentioned one other place in the Scriptures. If you’ll turn to Acts chapter 22, Saul has been arrested. And he is telling about his conversion story to the Jewish people. And in Acts 22 verse 12 he tells the story. He says, “Then one, Ananias, a devout man, according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there came to me. And he stood and said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at the same hour, I looked up at him. Then he said, ‘The God of our Fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One and hear the voice of his mouth. For you will be His witness to all men of what you

have seen and heard. And now, why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, wash away your sins calling on the name of the Lord.””

That’s all we know about Ananias from the Scriptures. He was a devout man according to the law. Now Saul, later he’d become Paul, he would never say that about the Christian. That’s the expression he used to describe a Hebrew, Jew. You see, there was a Hellenistic Jew and there was a Hebrew Jew. And the Hebrew Jew was a higher Jew. Saul was a Hellenistic Jew from Tarsus. A city that was filled with Hellenism! And even though he was a Pharisee of the Pharisees, he was a Hellenist Jew, just one notch lower. And when he is arrested, he says, “Hey, wait the minute. Part of my story is about Ananias. He was a Hebrew Jew. He is a top Jew. He was considered a great man, and he is part of the story.”

So now we go back to Acts chapter 9, and we know that much about Ananias. He was a Hebraic Jew, he wasn’t Hellenistic. We know also, he was not a deacon. We know he was not an apostle. We know he wasn’t called the leader of the Damascus church. We assume he is a good man, but he is simply called “A disciple of Jesus Christ.” Wow! I’ll tell you brothers and sisters, if at our grave side or during the memorial service if any of us should pass away, and they would say this: “That person was a disciple of Jesus Christ,” you don’t need to say anything else. That says it all. He was a disciple of Jesus Christ, Ananias.

Well that’s interesting. But I am sure there were other disciples of Jesus Christ in Damascus. Why choose Ananias? Well God is not half hazard in what happens? He carefully has Luke records special things, and we begin to unmask what the story is all about by looking at the name, Ananias. Ananias and Anis are Greek versions of the name, Hanania. Hanania in the Hebrew means, “Gracious is Jehovah.” We would say it this way, “God is gracious.” And that is really part of the theme of this entire story. God is gracious, God is a giver, God provides and we accept. God is gracious. So God tapes on the shoulder of a man, who’s very name means, “God is gracious.” He says his name, “Ananias.” And Ananias responds: “Here I am Lord.”

Now do you note that? There is no surprise on the part of Ananias that God Himself has spoken to him. Why not? Well, we can understand theologically, surely Ananias believes that Jesus died, was buried and rose from the dead. Sure, Jesus is alive, and Jesus wants to communicate with His church, so that makes sense. I’ll tell you, there is something even more profound about this, and that is, that that was normal. Ananias was used to hearing the voice of God. So I ask you a question. Are you used to hearing the voice of God? That’s the norm. When we spend time in God’s word, when we spent time praying about what we’ve read in God’s word, we are going to hear the voice of God.

Now, I understand that we can be going through a dry season. I know. There are times in our lives when we are faithful in our devotional experience. We are reading the Word of God, we are praying about what we are reading. But still seems like God is silent. Those are times, anointed by God to teach us how to walk by faith, to remember how He’s led us in the past, and to hope in the future that He will lead us again. And those times we simply walk by faith. If you are in the dry season, hang on. Keep moving forward, you’ll hear the voice of God again.

But the amazing thing about this is that it was normal for those people to hear God. It should be normal in our lives to hear God speak. In fact, let me ask you a question. And you don’t have to

signify it in any way. I'm just creating thought. Did you come today expecting to hear God? We should. In a few months, sometime this summer, we are going to enter into a brand new building. Praise the Lord, yes! Praise God. So what? Brand new building! Do you think we are going to get a crowd because we have a brand new building? "You know, we have the nicest church in town, you ought to worship with us." No!

I have a dream and I believe it's heaven born. I've been thinking for sometime, what is it that we - and when I say we, I think Seventh - day Adventist Christians, what is it that we have to offer the world that other Christians do not have to offer? And of course I think we ought to know Jesus better than anybody. We have Him to offer. And you know, thoughts like this, well we have a health message. There are a lot of people with health messages today. And many of them just as good as anything we have. And, we can talk about the doctrine and all that, but then you end up coming back to Jesus because if you don't know Christ, who cares about that other stuff, right?

So I ask you a question. If I get up on Sunday morning and I go to a church, and there is a Spirit filled pastor preaching the Word of God passionately, and clearly, and people are coming to Christ, and they are bringing friends so they can come to Christ. Will I be blessed if I go there? Oh, absolutely, God is there! He'd be there if they are worshiping on Monday, any day. He wants our worship every day of the week. But yet, in His word He has set aside a day, a special day, He has declared it as the Holy Day. It is sacred time that He wants to spend with us, and He wants us to spend with Him. And I hope that day for you is not just what day you go to church on. Because right now, get that out of your mind, you can go to church every day of the week. It's not an issue what day you go to church on, it's a day kept 24 hrs sacred, holy unto God.

But when it comes to worship, here is what I think. If by God's grace, we have a spirit filled pulpit ministry, and people are coming to Christ, and the preaching is centered in the Word of God, and you are bringing friends so they can come to Christ, and that is happening on Sabbath, here is what I believe. I believe on that day that God has set aside to spend time with us, and He's asked us to set aside time to spend with Him, I believe on that day, we can experience God greater than any day of the week. So what do we have to offer? We have this to offer brothers and sisters. The expectation that when we gather in the name of Christ, and we open His word, and we worship Him, He will speak to us. And we will not be surprised. We will expect it because that's what He's promised, and that's what we are experiencing.

So "Ananias," the Lord says, there is no shock, there is no surprise, and "Here I am Lord." It's almost, "How have you been God? How are you doing today? "Here I am!" We go to Acts 9 verse 11: "The Lord said to him, 'Arise, go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called, Saul of Tarsus.'" So again you know we are looking at this passage trying to understand it. What is God saying to us? God is gracious, we learned that from Ananias. God wants to speak to us; we learned that from his experience. But now, in the providence of God, He has Saul at the house of Judas, and Judas by the way, is Greek for Judah, and Judah means: "Let God be praised. Let God be praised!"

So here you have this lonely man, hunkered down for 3 days without sight, water or food, in the house of the man that says, "Let God be praised." He is going to be visited by a man whose name

means “God is gracious,” and he is now on the street called Straight. Last week I told you from my studies that I learned that Damascus is one of the oldest cities in the world. Do you know, on Sunday I began preparing for this message, and I discovered I was wrong. And I apologize to you. Damascus is the oldest city in the world. Wow!

Now you begin to think. Well, what’s a significance of this? Damascus is the oldest city in the world? Do you know what the main street of Damascus was? Straight Street! Now, where is Saul? He is in the house on the oldest street in the world. Now here is what sings to my heart. Do you know what direction Straight Street runs? I’ll give you a clue. Turn to Psalm 103. Keep your hand here because we are coming back. Turn to Psalm 103 verse 12. The oldest street in the oldest town and the oldest message; Psalm 103 verse 12 it says, “As far as the East is from the West, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” What direction does that street run? East and West! The oldest message brothers and sisters about the graciousness of God is, He’ll take your sin and He’ll cast it as far as the East is from the West. There is Saul, a lonely man, in the darkness and God is listening to his prayers.

Well let’s go back to Acts 9. Acts 9, the last part of verse 11 says, “...he is praying.” Something about this prayer it’s got the attention of God. Now I guarantee you that Saul has been a praying person all of his life. He was a Pharisee. He probably fasted twice a week, probably prayed often, probably prayed in public so people could see him. But God is listening to this prayer. God is hearing this prayer. Why, what is the difference? Saul is praying in the name of Jesus. Big difference! Jesus says when you pray in My Name, I’ll answer according to your request. You see, when I come to God with my self-righteousness, and my arrogance, and my paucity (sp?), and all the good things I’ve done. There is no humility there. There is a bargaining, “God you owe me!”

But when you’ve been struck blind by the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth, and He says: “Hey, stop it!” And for 3 days you’ve been redoing your whole theology, going through the Old Testament text that you’ve memorized it as boy, trying to line them up and saying, “Wow, I was wrong, and I’ve been really wrong, and I’ve been really arrogant and I’ve been very self-centered, self-absorbed and on and on” all of a sudden a humility comes upon you. And he is praying a prayer of worship to God saying, “Oh God please forgive my sins.” And during that time he is going to remember, he is on Straight Street, it runs East and West, “I remember Psalm 103. I remember God saying, He would save His people.” And in that frame of mind, praying in the name of Jesus, that prayer hits heaven with great power and God responds back, gives him a vision saying: “A man named Ananias is going to come and restore your sight.”

Now picture this. You’ve got this man Saul over here praying. You’ve got Ananias here, you’ve got one God and He orchestrates it all. God sits in control of all that takes place brothers and sisters. It is so true. It is so, so true. Now we come to verse 13. It’s very interesting what happens. Ananias said, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he’s done to Your saints in Jerusalem, and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.” “He is going to arrest us all. I am going to the house of enemy God!” Now note this. God has spoken to Ananias, God has said, “Ananias, I want you to go to a house on Straight Street. It belongs to Judas. I want you to inquire about a certain man that is there.”

Ananias, in conversing with God, is completely and totally comfortable to question God. And so should you be. That's the kind of God we serve.

You have some questions - you can talk to God about it. Some of those questions He'll not answer, not immediately. Maybe Heaven before some of those hard, hard, "Why, why" questions are answered. But when God is directing in your life, and He wants you to go somewhere, and He is indicating that, it's okay for you to question that. It's okay for you to talk to God. He is not petty, He is not small, He is not put off by the weaknesses and the frailty of humanity that says, "God, I don't understand. You know it all." But God is pleased that you ask Him the questions. Most of us will ask each other. But God listens.

And when you come to verse 15 where it says, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of mine." In the Greek it's much nicer than that. It's like God is saying, "Ananias, it's okay, it's okay. You'll be all right. You do what I asked you to do. I am going to take care of you. Saul is a chosen vessel of mine. He is going to build My name before Gentiles, kings, and all the children of Israel. It's okay." And you come to the next verse. And this verse, when I read the story last Sunday thinking, "Wow, I've got to preach on this," and this verse, it just stuck a disaccord note, it says: "For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name sake." And I thought, "Oh God, I am going to have to address that." I mean I can hear the appeal now, "Come on, suffer for Jesus! How many of you want to suffer for Jesus?" You know the whole theology of suffering is confusing. But I do know this. Whether you serve Christ or not, if you live in this world you are going to suffer.

So it's not a matter of, "Okay well, if I serve Him I am going to suffer." If you are not serving Him, you are going to suffer anyways. It is just a lot of suffering in life. But this passage, taken as it is, doesn't really say to us exactly what it means. I'll draw your attention to 3 other verses. We are not going to turn there, but you'll know them. In Exodus 2 verse 24; it describes the children of Israel crying out to God, and God says, "I have heard their groaning." Okay? God says, "I have heard their groaning." In Isaiah 63 verse 9 and that is a beautiful verse; 8, 9 and following, just fantastic. And this afternoon I encourage you to read that. God in referring to the children of Israel says: "I will be their Savior." Then He says, "Their affliction was My affliction." In the New International Version it says, "Their distress was My distress."

Now we are here at Acts 9. Look at Acts 9 verse 4. This is what Saul is told by Jesus: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Now we touched on this last week a little bit. That what happens to you happens to Christ. You begin to put this together and verse 16 makes sense if you read it this way. I am going to read the way that's written then I am going to tell you what it means. "For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." Here is what Jesus is saying: "I will show him how many things we are going to suffer together, we are going to suffer together." You see, God's grace turns lonely into lovely. You are not alone on your journey. I don't care how lonely you are, you are not alone. "I will show him how many things we are going to suffer together."

In verse 17 Ananias went on his way and entered the house. And laying his hands on him, he said the most amazing thing. He walks into the house, goes up to Saul, puts his hands on him and he says: "Brother!" Now picture this. This is a very evil man Saul, just a few days before. This is

a man who has been very corrupt and vile and self-centered and evil. But Christ came into his heart. And now a representative of the church comes along, he basically puts his arms around him and says, "Brother, welcome to the family." No probation, you don't have to prove anything. When you get Christ it's brand new from then on. And I don't care what sins you have committed in your past, they are gone in Christ. "Welcome to the family, welcome to the family." What a picture of grace! What a picture of salvation and how God feels towards sinners who turn to Him.

Verses 18 and 19, "Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized!" He ate, he was made strong and he fellowshiped with the disciples. You know the last part of verse 17 where Ananias says, "Receive your sight," do you know there is another way to translate that. Another way to translate that in the Greek: "Look up, look up!"

I don't know what is blinding you today? I do know this. The Lord wants to remove that from your eyes. He is asking you to look up to do it. I don't know what loneliness you have in your life? You may have lost a loved one. God's grace will see you through. You may be a young person who is praying every day, "God, where is he, or where is she? Where is my life's companion? It's lonely and I am trying to serve You." There may be a multitude of other areas in your life you feel lonely. I have good news today. God's grace turns lonely into lovely.

And today, if you have not accepted Christ as your Savior, I am going to give you an opportunity to do that. If you have accepted Christ as your Savior, but you recognize, life's distresses, doubts, difficulties, and all those things have kind of, maybe put scales over your eyes and you are not seeing clearly. Or you haven't heard His voice for a while. Or maybe none of those things are happening but you want a deeper experience with Christ, I am going to give you a chance to say: "God I want to have a deeper experience." So think of this. If you are going to accept Christ as your Savior, or if you want to say: "I want to a deeper experience," please stand.

"Father in Heaven, indeed You are gracious. Indeed You are to be praised. Lord please remove those things that are blinding us from You, and help us to see You, to hear You, to follow You, and please by Your grace, turn our lonely into lovely. We pray in Jesus name, Amen."