

GOING STRAIGHT
ORIGINS SERIES PART 2 - GOING VIRAL
Dan Burrell

Good morning Life Fellowship. We are going to be in Acts Chapter 9 this morning on this Father's day. I think all of us reflect back on this annual holiday to our own fathers, to the dads that reared us for better or worse. I lost my dad when I was 22 years old. My dad and I were as different as two people can possibly be. He was a big tall guy at six foot three, and he was a simple guy that grew up on a farm and became a railroader engineer. He bought his own farm, and came to know Christ at the age of 22. And when Christ came into his life, his transformation was radical. He changed completely from the inside out.

Eventually a few years later he would go on to start a church in our living room. And while my dad and I were as different as two people could be, the impact of his life made a difference not only in my life, but in the lives of those who would eventually go to that church, grow up there, and many of whom went on to serve the Lord vocationally.

Many times people ask me about my dad, and I don't talk about him a lot for a variety of reasons, but I would say that my dad was a very simple guy. For instance he never flew on an airplane, I don't know that he ever saw the ocean, and he never went to college. I am kind of the opposite. I took my height after my mom who is only five foot two, and I always felt ripped off because I am only halfway in between my mom and my dad. My sisters grew tall for girls, but I caught my mom's genes. And I did go to college, then went on to college, and frankly I have been in college ever since I started going to college, either as a student or a professor.

I love traveling, and in fact this Thursday I will jump on a plane on the way to Nairobi, Kenya so I would appreciate your prayers as I will be with our missionaries Rick and Diane Wilson. Next Sunday I will be preaching in a church in Nairobi, then the next day I will start training national pastors, which is a passion of mine, and I will also be working with the Christian school there training their faculty. I am looking forward to that and I have been doing similar missionary work a couple of times a year for twenty some odd years.

My dad would have looked at that and wondered 'why' as that wasn't his cup of tea to travel like that. Or he may have wanted to but never had the opportunity to do so. I sometimes wish I could live on a farm again, until I visit a farm, and then I am thankful that I am a city boy now. We glamorize our pasts, and I glamorize my growing up on a farm, but it only takes a few moments enjoying the odors and the sweating that goes with a farm until I think God I am a city boy now.

But something about my dad that I treasure was his appreciation for the simple things. So this morning as we approach Acts Chapter 9 I am going to give a nod to my dad. This morning I am not going to give you a deep theological treatise, I am not going

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to try to explain to you the etymology of the Greek terminology that was used under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to explain the conversion of Saul. I am not going to try to uncover some deep doctrinal mystery that we will be able to understand as we read this. What I hope at the conclusion of this message is that one simple and yet profound thought might occur to each of us that will transform how we approach the next seven days.

Many times the best things in life are the simple things, the clear things, the direct things. God, who is the most complex of anything that exists in the universe, enjoys using simplicity. And sometimes we lose the complexity because we fail to appreciate the simple. So this morning will you bear with me while we stay simple as we look at Acts Chapter 9? Please follow along as I read beginning in verse 1 which is the story of the conversion of Saul.

“But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”

Let’s just stop here and appreciate what is going on because this is the Saul that we talked about a couple of weeks ago who was standing on the sidelines egging on the mob against one of the first deacons, Stephen. And he actually allowed them to give him their coats to watch as they murdered Stephen in the dust of the hills outside Jerusalem. Notice the terminology that the Holy Spirit wanted us to capture when describing Saul’s zealotry. ***“Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.”***

Wow! That is pretty powerful, isn’t it? ***“Breathing threats and murder.”*** I can just almost feel the hot breath of anger emanating from Saul when I read those words. Have you ever known someone who was so filled with rage and hatred that when you talked to them you could literally almost feel the heat of their breath? And possibly see little flecks of spittle flying across from them to you? The rage that would make their eyes almost bulge? This was Saul. This was a zealot. This was a man on a mission.

This passage tells us that he was seeking letters of authorization so that he could go to one of the oldest cities in all of civilization which was Damascus. We know it as Syria today. And what Saul wanted to do was to visit the synagogues there. Now we know that the Jews have been spread out all over Asia Minor at this point as well as the Middle East. So there were congregations of them and they didn’t all meet in the same place. We know of at least five synagogues that were in existence in Damascus.

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So Saul wanted letters from the supreme high priest, the big Jewish authority. He wanted the high priest to give him these letters of introduction and he was going to go find those upstart cult members. Now maybe you are wondering why I said, ‘cult members.’ But yes, absolutely, they were viewed as a cult. In fact notice what Saul calls them here. He refers to them as “*belonging to the Way.*” And notice in your Scripture that the word ‘Way’ is capitalized.

We often refer to Christ followers today as Christians. That is not a term you see frequently in the Scriptures, and not at all in the book of Acts. In Acts Christ followers were more frequently referred to as disciples, and that is the term we often use, particularly internal in the church. Outside of the church we refer to Christ followers as Christians, and inside the church we often refer to each other as disciples of Christ. And in this day they just referred to them as members of ‘the Way.’

Now we don’t know for sure where they got that term, but we know that Jesus said, “*I am the way, the truth and the life.*” And I am guessing that maybe once they kind of latched on to those words it may have been a term that they used with each other. ‘*Are you a part of the Way?*’ ‘*Are you a part of the movement of Christ followers?*’ *Do you know Jesus?*’

We know that over the course of several years when they would see each other they would use the term ‘*Maranatha*’ in their language, which meant Christ is returning. We also know that sometimes they would say, ‘*He is risen,*’ as another way of greeting. But there was this idea that they were a part of this insurrection group, and not in a political sense but in a religious sense. These were the folks that were the opponents of the Jewish traditions that dated back thousands of years.

And here was this fire breathing dragon, named Saul, who is saying that they could not tolerate this. So he wanted letters of authority to introduce him in the synagogues. He was going to go to Damascus, one of the great civilizations of the world, and he was going to find these cult members, not caring if they were men or women, and he was going to put them in shackles and take them back to Jerusalem. They would then stand trial, and they would then either be put in prison or they would stone them, doing whatever they needed to do to stop this movement.

So do you get how devoted Saul was? I want you to understand because this is a big deal that is getting ready to happen. Saul was a firebrand. Now look if you would in verse 3. “*Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ and He said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.’*”

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I want to pause here and note this - Jesus had already died. Jesus had been resurrected. Jesus had been transfigured and ascended into Heaven. And so when Jesus says that Saul is persecuting Him, how does that make sense? He is gone. No, what was going on is Saul was persecuting Jesus' bride. Now I am of that nature, of that generation perhaps, where when you say to your spouse, *'I am marrying you before God'* that two becomes one. So if you attack my wife, you are attacking me. And my wife feels the same way; if you talk about me, she feels like you are talking about her. You are not going to put anything between the two of us because we are in tandem, we are one. So when Christ says Saul is persecuting Him, He means Saul is persecuting His bride, His beloved, those for whom He died.

Can I just pause here for a mini rant? And you know me and that I love to rant. Why is it so often that we give less grace to the bride of Christ than we do to those who don't even know Christ? We will criticize, gossip about, attack, be unkind to, just absolutely malign in many ways our fellow believers in Christ at a level that I believe often grieves God. When we are not right with each other, we are not right with God. This is something that He died for, and this is His bride, the church.

And we ought to be very, very careful about maligning each other, about criticizing each other, about attacking the church and our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are the ones who deserve grace. They are the ones for whom Christ died. They are the ones who are our brothers and sisters. We are indeed family. And so when Saul was confronted by Jesus, He was saying, *'You criticize, you breakdown, you murder, you hate me, because I am the church.'*

Let's continue on and see what happens in verse 6. ***"But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*"**

So Saul is traveling down the road, he is thinking about going to these synagogues, arresting some people, and he is just making all these plans. Then all of a sudden, bam! This Damascus road experience is where Jesus confronts Saul on a very personal level. The people that are with Saul, his entourage, couldn't see Jesus, but they could hear His voice. The next thing you know the fire breathing Saul could no longer see, and he had to be taken by the hand like an old blind man to be led the rest of the way into Damascus.

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Now don't you know that didn't catch their attention, that didn't rattle them some. And once they got to the house where he was staying Saul told them to leave him alone. He went to where he was staying, closed the door, didn't eat or drink, and was alone with God for three days contemplating what he had just heard. And in that experience, at some point from the time that Jesus said, "***Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me,***" at some point he surrendered. And Saul realized that this was Jesus the Messiah, and his life changed at that point.

Now in verse 10 we have a transition. "***Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias.***" I am going to want us to focus on him quite a bit this morning. "***The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' And he said, 'Here I am, Lord.' And the Lord said to him, 'Rise and go to the street called Straight.***" And we have to love that, don't we? I mean the specificity of this, '*Go to Straight Street, Ananias.*'

Now my mom used to love Straight Street, okay? She would always say to me, '*Now you straighten up,*' because she knew she had a little switch to use to give me a one way ticket to Straight Street. She was absolutely committed to me living by the phrase, '*the straight and narrow.*' We have kind of lost the original meaning of that term in our vernacular today, and we often think of other things when we think about '*going straight,*' but going straight means getting on the right path, being in the right spot where God is able to do business in our life. So of all the different places Saul could have been, all the different streets he could have been on, he was on Straight Street.

"And the Lord said to him, 'Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' Now Ananias had heard about this Saul, okay?

"But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at 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 instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer.*" Notice this because this is a prophetic utterance that something is going to happen.

"For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said. And now notice the complete change here - "***Brother Saul.***" From the feared man who had come to Damascus to arrest and murder his ilk, now Ananias says, "***Brother Saul.***"

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“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened.”

What a wonderful story, what a wonderful testimony we hear. Now I am pretty sure you have probably heard that I always seem to have an opinion on everything. But when I come to a passage like this it is almost like, ‘*Man, what am I going to say?*’ When I see this passage I feel like the proverbial mosquito in the nudist colony seeing all the potential and I just don’t know where to start. (*Laughter.*)

And now that is the only thing you are going to remember from this entire sermon. But I see all the potential here and I don’t know where to start. As I was prepping for this several weeks ago part of me thought, ‘*I am just going to focus on this wonderful conversion.*’ However, I am not. We will talk about it a little bit because this story of conversion is so wonderful. And then we will study it again later in Acts.

Saul’s conversion gets mentioned again in Acts Chapter 22 whenever the Hebrew Christians are like, ‘*I don’t know about this guy. I heard he was there when Stephen was murdered. And I heard how he was going to Damascus to arrest and kill people.*’ So Paul decided that he needed to tell them his story, so he tells his story again in Chapter 22 to the Hebrew believers so that they can calm down and realize this was real with him and that he was a different person. He was Saul before, but he is Paul now. The old man is dead and this is a new guy and they needed to hear his story personally.

And then later on as Paul is doing his missionary work and catching the attention of people, the king of Judea, Herod Agrippa, brought him before him. He had been in prison and there were all kinds of things going on. And Paul told King Agrippa that he needed to hear his story. ‘*You have to hear what happened to me.*’

By the way can I just pause here and bring this out again. I am just keeping it simple today, but I need to bring this in here. Sometimes we think that God can’t use us because we haven’t been to seminary, or God can’t use us because we are not educated, or because we are not eloquent, or something like that. But you know the story that I keep seeing from this is we just need to tell what Jesus has done for us personally. Just tell your own story. ‘*I was lost but now I’m found, was blind but now I see. I was on the road to perdition, and now I am on the road to heaven.*’

Your story doesn’t have to be super dramatic, but when you change directions and you go from a life that is destined to hell to a life that is promised for heaven it is a story worth telling. And you don’t have to have thirty-seven points memorized. You don’t

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have to have the entire New Testament memorized. You don't have to know the Romans Road or all the different acrostics that people use for evangelism; just tell your story. Let it be powerful. Let it unfold. And let the Holy Spirit do what only the Holy Spirit can do in people's lives as you talk about the difference that Jesus has made in yours. And we see this happening repeatedly for Paul when he tells his story.

But I also want us to talk a little bit about Ananias and his role in Paul's life. And that is because God called Ananias to begin a work in Paul's life that we today refer to as discipleship. Much of the actual discipleship of Paul would be done by the Holy Spirit. If you study his life you will know that there is about a three year period where Paul kind of drops off the map, and that is when the Lord takes him into the wilderness, or into isolation, so to speak, and the Holy Spirit disciplines him. And if you are going to have someone disciple you the Holy Spirit would definitely be the best one.

And at the same time we see something characteristic of Paul that we ought to pay attention to because it is very significant. And that is Paul constantly surrounded himself with other people who would join him, at least for a period of time in his spiritual journey. And this isn't an exhaustive list, and some of them didn't even turn out perfectly, but they always had an impact for his good and also for the other person's good.

We will begin today with Ananias, but we will eventually talk about a guy by the name of Barnabas who traveled with him to other places in the world. He was his traveling companion, his missionary partner. Then there was a woman who made purple fabric, and her name was Lydia. And Lydia was quite wealthy as a merchant in her community, well respected. And Paul had an impact on her and she had an impact on him. They had a partnership and she helped finance some of his travels.

And then we also know Paul met with a man named Silas and traveled for a time with him. Another traveling partner was John Mark, and that one didn't even end well. Eventually it was like, '*Get John Mark out of my face.*' And sometimes God brings people into our lives for a period and at the end you kind of wonder what that was all about. But God is in control of that, and there may be something going on in that person's life, or a confrontation that has to occur, and we accept that as part of the journey as well.

We also know that Paul had a couple of guys by the name of Titus and Timothy. I love this because whether it was John Mark or Titus or Timothy we know that Paul enjoyed investing with people that were younger than him, and he wasn't an old guy at that time. So he also brought younger guys alongside of him. And we have at least three books of the Bible, three letters that he wrote that became part of canon - the book of

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Titus, the book of I Timothy and the book of II Timothy, which are filled with his counsel and his mentoring to these two guys.

We know also that Paul worked with a couple, Priscilla and Aquila, and that they were very important to him. And Phoebe was a deaconess, a servant of the church and that is where we get the term deacon today. When Paul talked about Phoebe he was talking about someone who served faithfully in the church. She was one of the leaders and she was an important person in his life.

And there were others. But I just wanted you to notice that God takes us on a spiritual journey from the moment of our conversion, and He wants us to not live in isolation. It is not to be a solitary journey. God expects and anticipates and even commands us to walk in *koinonia*. I said I wasn't going into the Greek but I can't help myself. The Greek word *koinonia* is a term that has with it a meaning that we would call fellowship today. It is a companionship. And it is not one in front of the other, but rather has a connotation of two side by side, shoulder to shoulder.

And I don't know about you, but when I face the world, when I face life, when I face problems, when I face my own corrupt tendencies, it is better when I am not alone but that I am traveling shoulder to shoulder with someone and who will have the opportunity to help me process the different things, the temptations, the challenges, and the opportunities that come about during my journey.

And I also appreciate the fact that sometimes I have the privilege of speaking into others' lives as well. I particularly enjoy working with younger people because there are a few stupid things that I have done that I sure would like to have God be glorified by helping me keep somebody else from doing the stupid things in their lives that I have already done in my own life.

And by the way I have some older people in my life such as a devoted pastor who is now near the end of his life, by the name of Chuck Wood who lives in South Bend, Indiana. And for many, many years he would pick up the telephone and call me, or I would call him, and he would ask me what God was saying to me in my life, ask me how things were in the ministry, and we would encourage each other.

I like the fact that on Mondays I go out with Ben Rudolph as we have a standing appointment to have lunch together. And Ben who is younger than me will look right into my eyes and ask, '*Dan, what's God been saying to you lately? What is He saying to you through His word and through prayer?*' And the fact that he asks me those questions holds me accountable in my walk with the Lord.

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And these are important parts of our journey, and that's what I don't want you to miss out of this story. The conversion of Saul is stunning and amazing. We will see it again in Chapters 22 and 29. But in this passage that we read this morning, for this brief period of time we are introduced to Ananias. This is a different Ananias than the one we studied a few weeks ago as this was a common name then. But this Ananias was sitting at home one day and whether he had a dream, or whether he fell asleep, or whether God just put him in some kind of trance, God said to him: *'Ananias, you have an appointment. Get up and go to Straight Street and you are going to see a man there by the name of Saul.'*

And Ananias said, *'I hope I didn't hear that right. Saul, as in Saul of Tarsus, Saul from Jerusalem, Saul of the Sanhedrin, Saul, the man who stood by while Stephen was murdered, Saul, the man who I heard got letters of authority so that he could come to Damascus to arrest Christians - that Saul?'* And the Lord said, *'Yes, that Saul. And I have an assignment for you to go to Saul. You are going to provide him with healing and direction and you are going to baptize him. That is your job, Ananias, because I have a mission for him. He has to be prepared because he is going to suffer greatly during the rest of his life for my name's sake. And Ananias, you are step one in his discipleship journey.'*

I don't want us to lose sight that you and I have not only the opportunity but the responsibility to be walked by someone, as well as to walk with others in our journey. So let me give you some thoughts that we can take away from this passage.

Number one - you are never so far from God that you can't go to Straight Street. When I was reading this passage I was just reminded again how much God delights in using broken vessels. God likes using messed up people. And from time to time I will have a conversation with somebody, and I will try to direct that conversation toward where they stand with God, and to find out if they believe in Him. And often if I am talking to a certain kind of person they will give me something like this, *'Yeah, well God doesn't want anyone like me. I have to tell you that if you knew the real me, you wouldn't want to have anything to do with me. And I will tell you for sure God doesn't want anything to do with somebody like me.'*

Maybe they have an addiction, maybe they are immoral, maybe they are just a mean and angry person, maybe they have a bad past, maybe they came from the wrong side of the tracks, maybe they have just been a brawler and the kind of guy you want to walk on the other side of the sidewalk from because you are a little afraid of them. But those people think that there is something about them that makes them without hope, makes them the antithesis of what God might want in a human being.

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And if you ever feel like you are that person, or you know that person, I want you to remember a guy by the name of Saul. A guy so wicked that it was his goal in life to kill anyone who loved Jesus. He was the enemy of God. But you are never so far from God that He can't redeem you and give you wonderful, important, dynamic, world changing assignments for your future.

When we look at Scripture we can see all the broken vessels that God chose to use. Remember Rahab the harlot who hid the Israelite spies. God redeemed her and used her to help save the children of Israel and give them the great victory in the battle over Jericho. Or remember the fishermen with the big mouth, always bragging, brash, crude. You remember him as the guy who said, '*I don't know this Jesus,*' not once, not twice, but three times and he even cursed. That was the guy by the name of Peter, who would be used right alongside Paul to establish the church.

Those are the kind of people that God likes to use. And then there was Mary Magdalene, a woman who tradition tells us had a rather questionable character in morals and values. And then there was Zacchaeus who was not only short but a tax collector. No one liked him, no one respected him, and no one wanted anything to do with him. In order to see Jesus he had to climb up a tree. But Jesus saw him and He wanted him.

So if you think you are too fat, too short, too tall, too skinny, or too ugly, whatever physical attribute you think makes God think less of you, remember that God chose Zacchaeus and he was a hated tax collector. We still are not very fond of tax collectors today, are we? If you work for the IRS I'm sorry. The fact is Zacchaeus was not someone that we would have gravitated toward. He wasn't one of the pretty people with the nice job. But Jesus told him he was going to his house today.

Then there was Samson who was just a mess, but God used him as a judge. Samson could not control his own lust, passion and anger. He was just not a good moral upright guy. And then we like to think about the mighty warrior Gideon, but remember that he kept testing God over and over again. Or what about Hosea who married a hooker? And yet God used him to call his people back to repentance.

And what about Elijah the mighty, who we always think about calling down fire from heaven. But remember him cowering in the cave afraid of Jezebel who wanted to kill him. God had to tell him to get up, that He had 7,000 people who had not bowed their knees to Baal.

What about Philemon who owned a slave named Onesimus? We have a book of the Bible telling that story of forgiveness and reconciliation. Or how about Jonah? Jonah was the most reluctant prophet ever and he ran from God. He ended up in the belly of a

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great fish. And there are many more imperfect, fallen, broken, frightened, frail, impetuous, cocky, depressed, unstable people, and these are the ones God invited in and He had something big for them to do.

So whatever excuse that you may be trying to use in your life that says, '*God can't love somebody like me. God can't redeem somebody like me. God can't use somebody like me,*' I want you to remember that God delights in using the least of these to glorify Him the most. He has your name, He has your number, He knows your past and He has a great future for you if you will just become His.

The second thing is this - no one will get your attention and change your direction like God will. A real encounter with God is going to change you. It will change you suddenly, it will change you dramatically, it will change you directionally, it will change you publicly, it will change you permanently, it will change you intensely and it will change you completely. And remember this, God knows how to get your attention. He knows your address, He knows your destination, and He has an apartment reserved for you on Straight Street. He wants you to go straight.

Don't think you can run from God - ask Jonah. Don't think God is finished with you - ask Elijah. Don't think you can be held hostage by your past - ask Rahab. Don't think you are too cocky or arrogant, don't think you have fallen away and can't be redeemed - ask Peter. God has a plan for you, and when He wants your attention He will get it and it will change your life. Are you ready?

I believe there are people in this room, I believe there are people with whom we will come in contact with this week, I believe there are people today who may just be rolling out of bed right now who God wants to change the trajectory of their future. Will you let Him do it? Will you answer His call? Does He have to hit you with a lightning bolt? Does He have to strike you blind? Or will you just say, '*Yes. Yes. Yes?*'

Number three - God will give you people to help you on your journey to go straight. The process of becoming mature in your walk with Christ is called discipleship. And every one of us who knows Christ ought to be engaged in that work in two ways. And by the way there are two sides, it is not either/or - it is both/and. But there are two things that are important to every Christian and that is this - who is walking with you and with whom are you walking? Who is it that is in your life right now that is speaking truth to you, that is holding you accountable, that is partnering with you in ministry, that is helping you on that next step? And who in your life has God assigned to you for you to be that to them?

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Who do you see that is struggling? Who do you see that is a baby Christian? Who do you see that may not even know Christ yet and you need to be the one to introduce them to Christ? Who in your life is your one that you are praying for? Who is it that has trusted Christ but they have never grown spiritually? Who is that God wants to use in an incredible way, and for a part of that process of them being prepared, God wants you to walk with them? To help them, to teach them, to encourage them, to facilitate them, to support them, to guide them to do whatever it takes for the period of time that you are walking together?

Who is your Ananias? Who is the person that will get you from Step A to Step B, and who is the person that you are responsible to get from Step A to Step B? You see Ananias is just a tiny parenthesis in the whole of Scripture, but God still recorded this part of the story. God wanted us to know this. And really the only thing that Ananias was supposed to do in Saul's life that we know of, that is recorded here, was go to this house, lay his hands on him and pray for him.

And Ananias got to see Saul's scales drop off his eyes. Now that is a really interesting term because the word 'scales' there literally means like fish scales. There was something that grew over Saul's eyes on the Damascus Road. And when Ananias prayed over Saul these scales just dropped off and he could see again. And lastly Ananias was to baptize Saul. After that we don't hear from Ananias again. But he was there to take Saul from Step A to Step B.

I see Stu Lockerbie right here. I love this guy, and he is such an important part of our church. God has placed Stu here in this church and given him a passion. And his passion is to help people get from Step A to Step B. I remember the first time we talked about it. He was asking me a question about baptism to make sure we agreed on it. He was questioning me because he wanted to make sure that baptism was important to us as a church. And do you know what Stu's role in this body is? When someone accepts Christ and indicates they are ready to be baptized we give Stu their name. And Stu's job is to get people from Step A to Step B, that first step of obedience after salvation. Baptism is the public identification of salvation.

We don't take that lightly here by the way. We want to know it is real. This is not a simple ritual; this is something that is important. You are publicly proclaiming your faith and trust in Jesus Christ. You need to know what that means and why that is significant because we want to make sure that people know that because it is a testimony of the transformative work of the gospel in our lives. So Stu will go to them and he will tell them he is here to help them get ready for baptism. He talks to them, he puts them in a class about baptism, he walks them all the way to the point where they literally get into

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the baptismal tank and he hands them a towel as they get out. Then someone else may pick them up from there, but Stu is their Ananias for that portion of their journey.

And I love that. Now let me ask you, where are you in that process? We need people who will meet weekly with folks, who will say, *‘I want to read the Bible with you. I want to show you how to study the Bible. I want to help you on this part of your journey. I want to encourage you. I want to pray with you. I want to help you overcome an addiction. I want to help you be accountable as you grow in this next step.’* There ought to be in all of us this question that says, *‘How can I help others on their journey?’* We are not to be isolated.

And by the way, there ought to be in our heart this spirit, this willingness to say, *‘Help me on my journey.’* Paul could have said to Ananias, *‘Who are you, and why are you here? How did you find out that I was here?’* But instead he submitted because he was broken. Christ had torn him up. He knew he was a mess, so when Ananias came I am confident he said, *‘Pray with me, brother. I need it. Lay your hands on me, brother. I need it. What is next? Where do I go? God has obviously sent you here, so help me on this journey.’*

And folks, too often what we do is we lose momentum and we lose progress that we ought to be gaining because we want to live in isolation rather than *koinonia*. We want to do it on our own rather than to submit to discipleship. We want to be isolated and safe because we know we can fail. But God does not call us to that. God calls us to accountability. That is why we talk Small Groups all the time here. And let me say this to you, you won’t go forward spiritually as far and as fast and as significantly as you can if you try to walk in isolation. So I encourage you to get involved in a Small Group.

Now please understand my heart. I am not trying to be harsh, and I get it, I don’t like Small Group either. If I am going to be perfectly honest I am the kind of guy that I will talk to ten thousand people till their ears are bleeding and they are begging me to shut up. I have no problem with that. But if that is constricted to smaller and smaller groups then I get more nervous and more nervous, and I will become reclusive. Seriously, I made sure that my ear phones were charged up for when I get on the airplane to Kenya on Thursday because I want to be able to get in my seat and put my ear phones on so that someone won’t want to talk to me for the seventeen hours of flight time.

Maybe you are thinking, *‘But Dan, you are a pastor. You are supposed to witness to people.’* And I know that, but it doesn’t mean that it isn’t a struggle for me. And that is why I am in a Small Group because I know that on my own I am a selfish so and so. But the Holy Spirit hasn’t given up on me and I don’t want to be how I am inclined to be but I want to be how God has designed me to be. And for me to do that it is kind of like

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going to the gym. I have to do what is best, not what is easy. I have to do what is right, not what is convenient.

And as much as I might dread it, or as much as I find it difficult, Wednesday night when my Small Group comes over to my house, (and my Small Group is not small, it has 27 young people in it), I get so excited talking and listening to them. And Small Groups are supposed to last 90 minutes, but mine last five hours. I am not lying, we start at 6p and I finally chase them out of my house at 11p. I work with college kids and I have food, so you connect the dots, okay? *(Laughter.)*

And we just talk and talk even after the food runs out. And it is okay even for five hours because we are on a journey together. I even had a young man show up to Small Group who comes from India who doesn't even go to our church. He had met someone from our Small Group who invited him to come. And by the way I am going to perform his wedding in a few months up in Boston, because we are walking together on this journey. *(Applause.)*

He told me this week that he believes that God wants him to go vocationally into ministry. He has a degree in finance and he is working for Bank of America, but now God is calling him into the ministry. And I am just so excited to be walking with him from Step C to Step D, and someday he may go back to India and start a church there. I don't know what God has for him in the future, but I am sure privileged to be at Straight Street with him.

Who are you at Straight Street with? I look back over my life and I remember all the people who poured into my life and I thank God for them. People who were simple, people who didn't go to college, people who I don't even know anymore, but for that period of time they walked with me and they poured into me on that part of my journey. During that time of my life God used them in my life. And we need an Ananias in our life, and we need to be an Ananias in someone else's life. So make sure you are not so anonymous that God does not want to use you in His work.

Ananias didn't go to the Jerusalem School of Theology, he just loved Jesus and was willing to obey. And you are not so insignificant, your past is not so bad, you are not so unequipped that God cannot use you in the journey of someone else. You should never fear stepping up to do God's work. You should never fear that. There are people who need to be leading student life groups right now, who won't because teenagers make you afraid. You are afraid they will laugh at you. They are teenagers so they will laugh at you anyway, so you might as well join them. And by the way you laughed at people when you were a teenager too.

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There are life groups that need leadership right now in Student Life. There are kids in Kid Life right now who need a teacher who will help them get from Step A to Step B. That is one of the reasons why in a few weeks I am going to be over there working in Kid Life, because your pastor is not so important that he can't go over there and spend some time telling Bible stories and serving those kids. And I challenge you to give it a try because you might be an Ananias for a 4 year old, or a 14 year old, or a 24 year old, or an 84 year old.

But never fear stepping up to do God's work because it is not about us; it is about what He wants to accomplish through us. God places as much importance on the little tasks as the big displays. God would not use Ananias in the same way that He was going to use Saul. As far as we know we don't think Ananias was beheaded, crucified, boiled in oil or stoned. But God had a time for him. He had big plans for Paul too, but it was going to end very difficultly.

God has a different plan for each of us. We ought not envy or fear other people's plans but rather just live out our own plans. And we ought never to underestimate the potential in any one single person. There is no person so far from God that He does not want to draw them to Him. There is not a person so small, so young, so illiterate, so different from us, that God is not as interested in them as He was in us.

Number four - we are not bound by our past, nor are we fully aware of our future. I grew up very simply, lived on a farm, close to a town of 12,000 people, my parents didn't go to college, we were not wealthy, but God for whatever reason wanted me to grow up, go to college, go to different countries around the world to train national pastors, and to be a pastor someday to some really wonderful people. However, if you had told me that when I was 14 years old, I would have probably laughed in your face. So He had to make me a school teacher first, then a school principal, then teach a Sunday school class, then pastor a small church of a couple hundred people, then move me from Palm Beach to Charlotte. After that I had to have some really hard experiences, and I had to move back to Florida where I had an even harder experience.

But now I have to tell you that I am sure glad that all of those journeys led me to right here and right now. If you had asked me ten years ago what God wanted me to do, I may have told you that I thought God was done with me. If you had asked me 50 years ago what God wanted me to do, I might have said I didn't think God wanted to use me. If you had asked me 30 years ago what God wanted me to do, I probably would have said the trajectory for my life was going to be far different than it turned out to be. God is not limited by our past, and we are not aware of all the great things God wants to do with our future. So let's just live for Him faithfully today.

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Here is my last thing - who is your next appointment with on Straight Street? I believe with all of my heart if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, God wants you in this moment to have an appointment with someone else for the next part of your journey. And if we refuse to listen, if we live in denial, if we throw out excuses, if we cover our eyes and choose to walk in blindness rather than awareness, we will miss those great appointments that God has for us. God may call someone in this church to be the next D. L. Moody, who was one of the greatest evangelists in American history. Now if you have never heard of him, please Google him this afternoon. But I want you to remember that D. L. Moody was led to Christ by a shoes salesman who was a Sunday school teacher in Boston by the name of Edward Kimble.

We don't know if anyone else in all the years that Edward Kimble taught Sunday school ever did anything at all for God, but we do know about one boy and that was D. L. Moody. He didn't disciple him as an adult, he may not have ever went to hear him preach, but for a little part of a little kid's journey, he was his Sunday school teacher, and Edward Kimble was Ananias for one of the greatest evangelists in American history. Some people are D. L. Moody's and some people are Edward Kimball's. Some are the Apostle Pauls' and some are Ananias.

But before God we are all somebody. Who is your next appointment with on Straight Street? We are at that time in our service where we ask God what He wanted us to see or hear and where do we go from here? You probably thought I was going to speak about the big conversion. *'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting my church?'* But I wanted you to think about Straight Street, and I want you to go straight. Ask God to show you someone who needs to go from Step A to Step B, or Step X to Step Y. Ask God to show you someone you can encourage and pray with. Or also maybe you need to ask God for someone to walk with you on this journey.

Join a Small Group, be faithful to the Lord's work, talk to someone about mentoring you, be discipled in your next step. Volunteer, go to one of the pastors and tell them you want to take the next step forward in your journey. Let us help you get connected. Maybe you would say, *'Dan, I am not Ananias and I am not Paul; I am Saul. And I am not a friend of Jesus. But I think I heard from God this morning and I think He wants me.'* If you want to trust Christ as your Savior, if you want to be a part of the Way, you want to be a Christian, you want to become a disciple of Christ, there is good news for you. You can have your moment today.

I am going to be standing right down here if you want to come and be saved. I will have someone show you from the Bible what it means to become part of the family of God, to turn from Saul to Paul, to walk with Him. If you don't want to do that, just

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slip out the back door and go to the right where there is a Next Step Station. Someone there will answer your questions and they will pray with you. Or you can go over to the far right where there is a prayer room and there will be someone there who will help you.

Maybe you are hurting, maybe you are struggling about something, whatever God would have you to do, right now in this moment will you hear from Him? You can pray up here at the altar, or at one of the crosses. If you want to take communion there are tables for that. Do what God would have you to do, but don't walk away from your appointment at Straight Street, because that is where the next step in your journey may begin. Let's stand as we pray.

Father, we love you. Thank you for your Word. Father, I pray that right now you would help us to know that next step we should take, that we would with courage and conviction and with faith walk toward your path and do what you called us to do. For it is in Christ's name I pray. Amen.

The preceding transcript was completed using raw audio recordings. As much as possible, it includes the actual words of the message with minor grammatical changes and editorial clarifications to provide context. Hebrew and Greek words are spelled using Google Translator and the actual spelling may be different in some cases.