

Saul of Tarsus

Tyesha hates you," Courtney said to her friend Alicia. "You're pretty, with a great husband and kids, you have a wonderful job."

The two women were talking about their coworker Tyesha, who had spread lies and ugliness about Alicia—Alicia was an ineffective, bossy manager, and she thought she was better than everyone else with her "Christianity."

But when Alicia heard one of Tyesha's children had been in the hospital with a serious illness and had recently come home, she wanted to do more than pray.

Tyesha was surprised when Alicia called to express her concern and asked if she could deliver a gift basket from work. Tyesha was pleased with the Edible Arrangement bouquet. But her mouth dropped and stayed open as she opened all four gift cards—a \$100 grocery card, \$100 gas card, and \$50 each to two nearby restaurants.

"All of this couldn't have come from our small unit," Tyesha said candidly.

"We care about you and your daughter Makesha," replied Alicia.

"I've been so hateful to you," Tyesha said, looking down.

"You are dear to me because you are dear to Christ," smiled Alicia. "Whatever pain you may have, the Lord wants to heal it and renew you."

1. *What kinds of people have you met who seem like they would never be interested in Jesus? Why do you think that?*

2. *Do you know anyone who had a poor reputation before giving their life to Christ? How would you describe their Christian witness today?*

3. *What are some ways you can build closer relationships with people who are far from the Lord without being tempted into sin yourself?*

LESSON FOCUS: Will you minister to your enemies in Jesus' name?

God Calls Ananias—and Ananias Protests

Acts 9:9-14, KJV

9 And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.

10 And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord.

11 And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth,

12 And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight.

13 Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem:

14 And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name.

Acts 9:9-14, NIV

⁹For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹²In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

At a house in Damascus, for three days after encountering the risen Jesus on the road to the city, Saul remained blind; furthermore, he "did not eat or drink anything" (vs. 9). His encounter with Jesus had shaken him to the core; he now realized that he had not only sinned against the Church but against Jesus Himself, who Saul now

recognized as Lord (vs. 5). In modern terms, Saul literally could not function like a normal human being. And yet, as verse 11 tells us, Saul had still been actively seeking the Lord in prayer. He certainly had much to pray about now.

In verse 10, the scene shifted to elsewhere in Damascus, to the disciple Ananias. Ananias is one of those unsung heroes of faith—men and women who do what they have to do, without recognition or reward. We know practically nothing about Ananias, yet God used this faithful disciple to lead Saul into the Kingdom.

Just as he had to Saul, Jesus “called to [Ananias] in a vision.” Ananias too recognized the Lord, who then instructed Ananias to go to the house of a man named Judas, “on Straight Street”—which extended lengthwise through the city—where he would find Saul, praying (vs. 11). The Lord further explained that not only had Saul been prepared for Ananias’s arrival, but that he had been told the reason for his imminent coming: “In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight” (vs. 12).

Ananias did not hold back from expressing his reservations, telling the Lord of the reports he had heard about Saul “and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem” (vs. 13). Furthermore, Ananias knew Saul had come to Damascus “with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name” (vs. 14). Therefore, before going to meet this (now former) enemy of the Church, Ananias needed to be certain. Despite the fact that Jesus Himself had given the instructions, Ananias had little confidence that this mission would end well for him. Of course, the Lord already knew better.

4. *What was Saul’s condition at the beginning of this passage?*

5. *What did Jesus instruct Ananias to do?*

6. *What was Ananias’s initial response?*

God Responds—and Ananias Obeys

Acts 9:15-17, KJV

15 But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:

16 For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.

17 And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

Acts 9:15-17, NIV

¹⁵But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

¹⁷Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

While Ananias' reservations were understandable from a human perspective, the perfect, risen Lord would have none of it. He first gave Ananias an imperative—"Go!"—although He then gave Ananias a fuller explanation for his mission: "This man" who had so vigorously opposed the Church would become an even more vigorous advocate for Jesus. In Jesus' own words, Saul ("who was also called Paul," Acts 13:9) was "my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel" (vs. 15). At a time when the Church was largely still in its infancy and often underground, Jesus told Ananias in no uncertain terms that Saul would be taking His message throughout the Roman world, even to kings.

However, Jesus also made clear to Ananias that Saul's mission would not simply be filled with triumph after

triumph—as if in some way the rest of the early church’s suffering would somehow be for nothing. Indeed, Jesus would show Saul, maybe above all others in the early church, “how much he must suffer for my name” (vs. 16). That suffering would in fact commence almost immediately after Saul’s spiritual and physical restoration.

Ananias was convinced, and obedient; as verse 17 states, he “went to the house and entered it.” Perhaps there was still a bit of human reservation, but he did exactly as Jesus commanded. He went to Saul, and shared what Jesus had shown him: “Placing his hands on Saul, he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here. . . .’” This was confirmation of the Lord’s work in both of them—they had both been witnesses of the risen Jesus, giving the same orders to both. Saul, the enemy of the Church, was indeed now a “Brother.” Ananias then reiterated the rest of his mission: Jesus had “sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” This statement would be fulfilled immediately (see vss. 18-19). Saul would not just be healed—he would be filled with the Holy Spirit for the work that lay ahead of him.



A Roman arch on Straight Street in modern Damascus.

Photo: Bernard Gagnon

7. *How did Jesus respond to Ananias’ reservations?*

8. *What did Jesus tell Ananias about Saul and his future mission?*

9. *How did Ananias respond to Jesus’ call?*

Forgiving the Unforgiveable

In 2006 an unspeakable tragedy occurred at a one-room schoolhouse in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. An unstable man took a group of young Amish girls hostage, injuring five and killing five others with gunshots before taking his own life. School shootings have become all too common, but this particular event carried an added layer of tragedy because of the peaceful rural religious lifestyle of the Amish community.

This was not the only remarkable facet of the story, however. On the very day of the shooting, the grandfather of one of the murdered girls warned his relatives, "We must not think evil of this man." Similarly, an Amish father said, "He had a mother and a wife and a soul and now he's standing before a just God." Members of the Amish community comforted the shooter's widow, parents, and parents-in-law, attended his funeral, and invited his widow to the funeral of one of the victims. These acts of forgiveness and love drew international attention.

Forgiveness such as this doesn't occur in a vacuum. In a tragedy, most people react viscerally and instinctively. Imagine the years of practice these brothers and sisters had at forgiving daily offenses, large and small, to create such a profound community response of Christlike love!

When we are tempted to hold a grudge, maybe the story of this gentle Amish community could inspire us to live a life free from hatred and revenge. What kind of a world would it be if we all lived like that?

10. *Discuss an example of a time when you forgave someone (no names) for a great offense against you. How did you do it? What did you feel like afterward?*

11. *Who in your life right now needs to be shown love even though they have hurt you? Pray for them with a trusted partner.*

12. *What counsel would you give someone who is having difficulty forgiving another's offense and expressing love for them?*

Loving Like Jesus

An old saying goes, “You may be the only Bible some people read.” Since one of the most central messages the Bible communicates is love—God’s love for us and His desire that we love one another—how can we communicate that message to those who resist reading His Word?

► *What are some specific examples of how God has shown His love for you (what He has provided for you such as forgiveness, etc.). How can you show these things to others?*

Examples of how God has shown love for you:

Ways you can show that same kind of love to others:

KEY VERSE

And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

—Acts 9:17, KJV

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” —Acts 9:17, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK’S LESSON

Week of May 29 through June 4

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

Mon. Isaiah 42:1-7 — God’s Servant Will Establish Justice.

Tues. Galatians 2:16b-21 — Live by Faith, Not Works.

Wed. Isaiah 49:1-13 — My Servant Shall Restore Israel.

Thurs. Isaiah 49:14-23 — God Will Not Forget You.

Fri. 1 Thessalonians 3:11-4:8 — God Desires You Live in Purity.

Sat. Colossians 3:8-17 — Clothe Yourselves with Love.

Sun. Isaiah 52:1-12 — You Shall Be Redeemed.

• QUOTES • THOUGHTS • QUESTIONS • THINGS TO REMEMBER •

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

• QUOTES • THOUGHTS • QUESTIONS • THINGS TO REMEMBER •

NOTES • IDEAS • PRAYER REQUESTS

THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH

Luke tells us in the first chapters of Acts the incredible story of how the Church was born following the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the 40 days after Easter, Jesus gave instructions to the disciples and said to wait for the empowering of the Holy Spirit before beginning their ministry. When the disciples asked Jesus if He would now restore the glory days of the kingdom of Israel, He instead focused them on their bold new mission—to “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). His Good News is a message for all people everywhere.

This sharing of the Gospel everywhere began when Jews from all over the Roman Empire gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit’s dramatic entrance with wind and fire empowered the disciples to speak in tongues, in foreign languages they did not know. When the gathered crowd asked how this could happen, Peter boldly announced that the long-awaited Messiah had come—and the people had crucified Him on a cross. This man who had denied Jesus three times just a few weeks earlier now called on everyone to repent, be baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit. Just as the prophet Joel had prophesied, Peter said, the last days were now here, and God was pouring out His Spirit on young and old, male and female, so that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (2:21).

Peter and John demonstrated the power of the Holy Spirit when they went to the temple later for their daily prayers. At the Beautiful Gate, they saw a lame man who had been lame from birth begging there for alms. Peter stopped, looked at the man, and said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ

of Nazareth, walk” (3:6). The man “jumped to his feet . . . went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God” (vs. 8). Peter used this opportunity to again share the message of Jesus to the “astounded” (vs. 11) onlookers.

Many of those who heard the Gospel believed in Jesus, and the number of new disciples grew into the thousands. The Jewish leaders began to persecute the apostles and their converts, and because of the intense persecution, “all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria” (8:1). Philip preached to the Samaritans, then the Holy Spirit directed him to “go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza” (vs. 26). There Philip found an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of the country’s treasury, riding in a “chariot” (more likely a kind of wagon) and reading from the prophet Isaiah. When the Ethiopian read Isaiah 53, about the Suffering Servant, he wondered who was being described. Philip gladly explained it was a prophecy about Jesus. The Ethiopian believed, Philip baptized him, then the Spirit took Philip away to other places to share the Good News.

One of the persecutors of the believers was Saul, who set out on the 135-mile journey from Jerusalem to Damascus to jail the converts there. On the road, he saw Jesus in a vision and was struck blind. Jesus also came in a vision to a believer named Ananias, who the Lord directed to minister to his enemy, the newly converted Saul. When Ananias laid hands on Saul, his vision returned, he was filled with the Spirit, and baptized. The man who had persecuted Christians now turned to praising them and One who had called him to ministry—Jesus Himself.



James Tissot (1836–1902) illustrates Jesus’ ascension in this painting of a crowd of disciples watching the Savior returning to heaven.

Brooklyn Museum



Philip is baptizing the Ethiopian in this Rembrandt (1606–1669) painting.

Museum Catharijneconcent



This painting by Ciro Ferri (1633–1689) shows Ananias laying hands on the blind Saul in Damascus.

Kunsthistorisches Museum/Public Domain



In this painting by Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), Peter and John are shown healing the lame man at the temple.

Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665) Metropolitan Museum of Art



The descent of the Holy Spirit (as a dove in the upper left) on Pentecost is memorialized in this stained-glass window depiction from a church in the Netherlands.

Dirk Crabeth (1520–1576) photo: Rolf Kranz



While the popular idea may be that Philip chased down a Roman battle chariot to witness to the Ethiopian, it was more likely a “chariot” like the one in this Roman relief, since Philip was able to sit next to the Ethiopian and read him Scripture.

Photo: Johann Jaritz



The Chapel of the Ascension in Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives marks the traditional site where Jesus left to return to heaven.

© trabantos/Getty Images

by Andrew Wood

Prayers of Revenge

“By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion . . . Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.” —Psalm 137:1, 8-9

The Book of Psalms is a collection of beautiful poetry, deep emotion, and gripping imagery. It also includes some of the most troubling words of the Bible such as Psalm 137:9, which expresses a wish for Babylonian infants to be “dash[ed] against the rocks.” How do we understand such a verse of inspired Scripture that seems so heartlessly cruel, and how do we reconcile it with the Bible’s admonition to love and do good to one’s enemies?

Perhaps we can understand this verse better if we consider that the writer is experiencing deep grief, not just at the loss of his country and refugee status in an enemy land, but he has been traumatized by witnessing the wanton murder of thousands of unarmed civilians, no doubt including some Jewish infants cruelly dashed against rocks.

In the face of extreme trauma, we can’t always find it within ourselves to forgive immediately. As we struggle with feelings of sorrow, rage, and a desire for revenge, the appropriate thing to do is exactly what the psalmist did—to express those feelings honestly to God, who is more than capable of handling them.

What we don’t see in this psalm is what the psalmist actually did to the Babylonian people, not what he wished would happen to them. Did he become a killer, or did he treat them with kindness in obedience to God? Hopefully the latter. Our feelings may take time to catch up to our loving actions, but nowhere in Scripture are we told to wait to do loving things until we feel like it.

1. Have you ever felt ashamed by the angry and vengeful thoughts you had toward another?
2. Did you find it helpful to express those thoughts in a journal, in conversation, or in prayer?
3. When do you think a person with thoughts such as these should seek professional counsel?
4. What are some examples of loving actions you could take despite the anger you may still feel?
5. What are some things you could do to start modifying your feelings toward an enemy?