



Week 3: Ananias and Paul Acts 9:10-18

GOAL:

Increase our openness to what God may be doing in others' lives and our willingness to be a part of it.

CHECKLIST

- Prepare for the meeting by praying for yourself and your group (feel free to use the prayer below) and reading through this Leader's Guide.
- Spend a few minutes in breakout groups applying today's discussion and praying for each other.
- Lead the group in a prayer time consisting of worship, thanksgiving, and intercession.
- Close by giving the group any final words and a blessing.
- Talk about what stood out for members from the "Growth Guide" devotions for this week .
- Take attendance in Planning Center, including guests/new members.

PREPARING THROUGH PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, I praise you for your kindness, your mercy, and the gracious forgiveness you have extended to me through the blood of your son, Jesus. I confess to you that far too often, I am so preoccupied with my own life that I miss the ways you're inviting me to be a part of what you're doing in the lives of the people around me. Teach me to intentionally listen for your voice and to respond in simple obedience, even when it leads me into uncomfortable places. And as I do, I pray that you will take my imperfect efforts and use them to create more and more "Odd Couples" in my life, demonstrating the miraculous unity that can be found in Jesus, for the honor and glory of his name. Amen.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

CONNECT (15-20 minutes)

As your meeting begins, allow group members to visit and catch up informally. After a few moments, lead the group through the following connecting activities:

Relational Connection: *In this section, spend time catching up relationally. If you have new people, make sure to give everyone the chance to introduce themselves. Whether you have new people or not, you might want to use an icebreaker question (“If you had to eat the same meal every day for the rest of your life, what would it be?” or similar) or share “highs and lows.”*

Spiritual Connection: *Ask your group the following two questions:*

- *Where have you seen God at work this week?*
- *In what specific areas do you need God to work this week?*

This is an opportunity to praise God for the good things happening and to ask for his help in our challenges. Our natural tendency will be to focus on our circumstances, and that’s ok. But this can also be related to our spiritual lives as well!

PRAY (5-10 minutes)

Thanks so much for experimenting with the worship-focused prayer last week! We’re going to use the same format this week, just swapping out the verses we use to guide the prayer. As we did last week, I encourage you to keep this time pretty short early in the semester as the group is getting used to it. You may find that the time naturally extends a bit as the fall progresses.

Here’s how it will work this week:

Introduce the prayer time

- Remind the group that this semester we are experimenting with some “worship-focused prayer.” The goal is to stretch ourselves in the area of prayer to help us know God better and put ourselves in position for him to transform us.
- Assure them that it’s going to be easy, and they won’t have to do anything hard or uncomfortable.
- Let them know that we’re going to focus on three areas: Praise, Thanksgiving, and Intercession (praying for each other’s needs). You’ll lead them through each section and give instructions along the way.

Lead the prayer time

You can use this script if it’s helpful, or say it in your own words:

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“All right, we’re going to begin by praising God for who he is. Psalm 100 says, ‘Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness.’ Let’s bow our heads and take a moment to praise God together. You don’t have to pray out loud, but if you’re willing, I’d love to invite you to pray something like, ‘God, I praise you because you are loving.’ Or ‘God, I worship you because you are eternal.’ We’ll do that popcorn style for a little bit, then I’ll transition us to the next section”

PRAISE

“OK, now we’re going to transition into some thanksgiving. Psalm 9:1 says, ‘I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.’ Let’s spend a few minutes thanking God for all he has done. Like before, we’ll do it popcorn style. You might want to pray something like, ‘God, thank you for forgiving my sins,’ or ‘God, thank you for bringing this group together.’

THANKSGIVING

“All right, we’ll close with some intercession – praying for each other’s needs. Based on what the group members shared a few minutes ago, let’s pray for each other’s needs. You don’t have to pray out loud, but you’re welcome to. I’ll close us in a minute.”

INTERCESSION

After a few moments, offer a brief prayer to close out this time.

DISCUSS (35-45 minutes)

- What was one thing from the Scripture readings and reflection questions this week that challenged you, encouraged you, or made you think?

***Leader’s Note:** We’ll ask this question every week. You don’t need to spend a ton of time on it (although you can if the Spirit is moving!), but it’s helpful to give people the opportunity to share with each other the way that God has been speaking to them in their times of Scripture and prayer. And hearing how God is speaking to others broadens and deepens our own experience with God and encourages us to stay consistent in investing in our own spiritual lives.*

- Read Acts 9:10-18 together.

***Leader’s Note:** It might be helpful to spend a few minutes giving some brief context on who Saul is (a dedicated Jew who was devoted to persecuting Christians), and who he became (Paul, the Apostle who planted churches throughout Asia and Europe and wrote a large part of the New Testament)*

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- Why do you think God might have chosen Ananias for this important task?

Leader's Note: *This passage is the only place in Scripture where Ananias is mentioned, and the text doesn't tell us why God chose him. However, there are several clues in the passage about why Ananias was uniquely suited for this role:*

He was listening. *God spoke to Ananias in a vision, and Ananias heard him! We don't know the nature of the vision, and it's possible that it was so significant that Ananias couldn't miss it. But it's also possible that it was the "still, small voice" with which God so often speaks. Whatever the case, Ananias was paying enough attention to hear God when he spoke.*

He was responsive. *When God spoke to Ananias, he responded with, "Yes, Lord." And even though he had questions for God, he was ready to obey. Don't miss the fact that the very first word Ananias said to the Lord was "Yes!"*

He was honest in his prayer. *When he heard what God was asking him to do, Ananias naturally had questions. But instead of letting those questions drive him away from God, he let them draw him to God in prayer. He humbly brought his questions to God, trusting that he would have the answer. And when God answered, he was ready to accept it.*

He was open. *God was planning on doing something totally unexpected in using someone like Saul to spread the good news of the gospel. Others might have been so closed-minded that they couldn't accept this unexpected turn of events. But Ananias was open to the fact that God might want to do something new. It's a helpful question to ask ourselves if we are open to God doing something unexpected in our lives!*

- Read v13-14. Why was Ananias initially hesitant to go see Saul? What kinds of people do you naturally resist interacting with? Why do you think that is the case?

Leader's Note: *The obvious answer is that Ananias was hesitant because he thought Saul was dangerous! And he had good reason to believe that – Saul had done tremendous damage to the Christian movement. It was natural for Ananias to be initially hesitant and fearful.*

Although we may not find ourselves in as extreme of a situation as Ananias was in, it's important to realize that we are also sometimes hesitant to interact with certain people. Help the group be honest about what leads to this hesitance. Perhaps, like Ananias, we're hesitant to interact with people whom we view as a threat of some kind. Maybe they aren't a physical threat, but they could be a threat to our self-confidence, social standing, or even our comfort. Or, we might be hesitant to interact with people who are from a different ethnicity or political party. Or we might be hesitant to interact with people of different personalities (outgoing vs reserved, etc.), educational backgrounds, or value systems.

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We all have people we hesitate to interact with – the important thing to think through here is why we're hesitant. Most of the time, as we evaluate this, we'll find that there is some kind of fear at the center of our resistance – fear of loss, fear of discomfort, fear of what may be required, etc. What Ananias discovered was that if God is calling you into a relationship, there is truly nothing to fear.

- What image did Pastor Larry use to describe bitterness? How can bitterness over past pain paralyze us and keep us from moving forward? Have you ever seen this in your own life or the lives of people you know?

***Leader's Note:** Larry used the image of quicksand to describe what happens when we become bitter. Once bitterness takes root, it can be really tough to escape! When we focus on the ways we have been hurt, it can cloud our vision of what may be planning to do in us or in others. You don't need to spend a ton of time here, but take a moment to let a couple of people share examples of how bitterness can keep us from moving forward.*

- Read verses 15-16. How does God respond to Ananias' objections? What can this teach us about the way God works? How might reflecting on this impact the way we view other people in our lives?

***Leader's Note:** Ananias focuses on what Saul has done and is doing, but God responds with what he has planned for Saul's future. He invites Ananias, through the eyes of faith, to see the divine possibilities of what God can accomplish through his power.*

One lesson we can learn from this is that God isn't limited by what has happened in the past. As Jesus says in Revelation 21, "I am making all things new!" This opens up a whole new way of viewing the people in our lives. We don't have to "cancel" those who have made decisions we disagree with, because we know that God can turn around even the most hardened sinner. (after all, he did it with us, right?!?)

Of course, this doesn't mean that we have to put ourselves in abusive situations. We can and should use our discernment to protect ourselves and others when possible. But it does mean that we never lose faith that God has a plan, even when we can't see the full picture. This allows us to see the people in our lives not for how they may have messed up in the past, but for their redemptive potential in Christ. We can recognize that Jesus has already paid the price not only for our sin, but for theirs...and we are free to love them and sometimes, like Ananias, to even play a role in what God is doing in their lives!

- Read Ephesians 1:18-21. How might a fuller understanding of this "incomparably great power" of God help us see the people in our lives differently?

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***Leader's Note:** This is really just an expansion of the previous point. We trust that God has a plan and “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph 1:11). And if we ever have any doubt about whether or not God has the power to change people’s lives, we simply look at the empty tomb! Paul tells us that the power God used to raise Jesus from the dead (!!) is the same power that is at work in those who are following Jesus. With this in mind, there should be no one who we view as a lost cause!*

- Read Acts 9:17-18. How did Ananias respond to God’s explanation? What does this reveal about him? How might he be able to call Saul “brother,” even though he has actively harmed Christians in the past?

***Leader's Note:** I (John) find Ananias’ simple faith and obedience stunning. After God gave Ananias the explanation, he didn’t argue, he didn’t ask a follow up question, he didn’t think about it for a few days. The text simply says, “Then Ananias went...” What beautiful obedience!*

And of course, this external obedience tells us something about who Ananias was on the inside. It is clear that he trusted God completely. Going to see Saul made no sense from a worldly perspective. But God has told him to go, and that was enough for him.

Another fascinating part of Ananias’ response is the fact that he refers to Saul, this man who had been actively persecuting Christians, as “brother.” This shows that Ananias had an extremely high view of salvation, and the fact that God has adopted us into his family. There were all sorts of reasons why Ananias might keep Saul at arms’ length. But once he heard that God had rescued Saul and that he was a follower of Jesus, that was all he needed to know. That bond...the one that came from their common experience of the grace of Christ...was stronger than anything else that could have torn them apart.

This is a hugely important concept for us as followers of Jesus. It is so common in our culture to identify yourself with one particular group based on ethnicity, politics, economics, or some other marker. And many times, Christians separate themselves from other Christians based on these external differences. But we must remember that the fact that all followers of Jesus have been adopted into the same family means that all Christians are brothers and sisters, and that connection is vastly more important than any other distinctions between us. A Christian Republican has more in common with a Christian Democrat than a non-Christian Republican. A Christian native Texan has more in common with a Christian immigrant from Africa than a non-Christian who has lived their whole life in Texas. All those who have been saved by the grace of Christ are members of the same family.

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BREAKOUT GROUPS (5-10 minutes)

As a reminder, we're experimenting with spending some brief time in smaller breakout groups each week as a way of "going deeper" with each other. Ideally, these groups would be 3-5 people of the same gender, but feel free to make adjustments based on the needs of your group. If you're a Sunday morning group, you might want to split into four smaller groups and ask them to make a circle in one of the corners of the room. If you think it would be helpful to these breakout groups, feel free to designate one person in each group as the "facilitator," but you certainly don't have to.

After (or as) people move into their breakout groups, read (or paraphrase) the following out loud:

In your groups, give each person a moment to answer this question: "Who in your life might God be calling you to reach out to as a 'brother' or 'sister' this week, even though their past actions might make you naturally hesitant?" After everyone has shared, take a moment to pray for each other. Since we just have a few minutes, make sure to keep it brief so everyone has an opportunity to share.

CLOSING

After the groups are finished (or when it's time to go!), call the group back together for a brief closing. During this time, you can give any final thoughts you need to share and close with a brief word of blessing.

Blessing: (feel free to use this blessing, substitute your own, or just close with a prayer)

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15:5-6)