



May 18: Rising from Hatred (Saul/Paul) | Acts 9:1-22

When I came to faith...it was pretty dramatic, quite a bit like Saul's encounter with the Lord on the Road to Damascus.

I was at bible camp, we were around a bonfire on the lakeshore, talking about having Jesus in our lives.

It was after hearing story after story that I realized, I didn't have what they had. I didn't have a single story of the Lord at work in my life. And I realized I didn't have a personal relationship with the Lord.

So, I stood up and shared my need for Jesus. Jaws dropped, all the kids stopped talking.

And for the next hour or two, I sensed God the Father and God the Son very powerfully, I wrestled with my unbelief, and finally surrendered.

Basically, the Lord knocked me off my feet and redirected my life.

As a young Christian, my heart was a bit clueless. At 17 maybe also a bit self-absorbed and apathetic or indifferent. But the Lord was faithful just like with Saul, he didn't leave me alone and stuck.

The Lord patiently walked with me and brought others into my life, helping change my heart from cluelessness, apathy, self-centeredness to a heart more open to loving service to others.

And I am still a work in progress, under construction. Yep.

John Wesley described it as being "perfected in love", a life-long process of sanctification and growth, being able to love more and more and in any circumstance.

For those who are open to God, we are all being "perfected in love".

We are in our third week of Rising Strong today and it has been a rich time for me.

As each week we have been affirming that it is only through a grace-filled encounter with the Risen Lord that we can rise strong.

It is only by grace we can move from what is in our hearts...skepticism, unforgiveness, even hatred and move into more of what the Lord wants in our hearts...faith, self-forgiveness, and loving service.

Jesus interacts with us, extending grace, in unique ways, unique to each of us and it can be a bit of a mystery to explain it all clearly. But as Jesus engages with us, through grace, our hearts are moved, changed, and grow.

And for today, in Saul's very unique experience...the Lord was moving his heart from hatred into loving service. And moving Ananias' heart from fear and judgment to more loving service to the Lord.

We needed all 22 verses, all of the text we read today, for us to see the change and growth of Saul's heart. Saul went from hating and murdering Christians into loving service to our Lord. Quite dramatic, over three days.

In a divided, chaotic, and violent world, hatred can bubble up even in the hearts of those who, on most days, seek to do good. These are times to test a person's faith. Amen?

Thankfully, the risen Christ, works to move in all of our hearts.

To move each of us from hatred, judgement, fear, avoidance, apathy, and hiding into places of real connection and ministry and service, so that we can work together for the sake of God's kingdom.

In our culture, there is an increasing temptation to write people off, make snap judgments, to dismiss others quickly. Sometimes it is based on superficial impressions or ingrained biases...a little like what Ananias did to Saul.

Let's explore three ingrained biases we might struggle with.

Sometimes we make snap judgments based on how people look. We often associate physical attractiveness with positive traits like intelligence and kindness. It is easier to like them. But we know that's not fair.

I remember clearly the day in sixth grade when I wore my first pair of white leather Nike's to school. Nike's used to be a big thing.

My pair were used, from my brother's girlfriend, but still in good shape. And once my classmates noticed my Nikes, all of a sudden they thought I was cool and hip.

I was ushered into the "in crowd" because of shoes? So silly!

Sometimes we make snap judgments based on money and lifestyle. People may be judged based on their job titles, income levels, or lifestyle choices. For instance, someone working in a service industry... who maybe wears a hairnet or work gloves might be unfairly judged as less ambitious or capable.

We know that's not fair either.

Sometimes we make snap judgments based on age and gender. Ageism and gender bias can result in unfair assessments. I am not saying this next thing is true...okay? But for instance, like viewing older individuals as out of touch or women as less competent in leadership roles.

Both of those biases would be a big mistake here, right?

We know we quickly judge others sometimes to deflect from our own insecurities. Or we find others with the same judgmental bias because we have a deep need to belong and feel a part of something. It's comforting to be included and in the "in crowd".

We do this even though we know this is not Jesus' heart for us or others.

We do this even though we know these judgments hinder genuine connection, obscuring the potential in those around us.

We do this even though we know it impacts our spiritual health and effectiveness in our relationships, in our families, and at times even at church.

And for the most part, I think we just want to believe we are doing the right thing. But are we?

I think it is very interesting that at the beginning of this text, both Ananias and Saul believed themselves to be doing the right thing.

Both believed they were being faithful and following the Lord, both being used in God's plan. They both thought they were right, both were loving God. Both of them.

They both refer to the voice speaking to them as "Lord," in verse 5 for Saul and in verse 10 for Ananias. They both expressed reverence toward some spiritual being outside of themselves, both hearing and replying to a voice. They would both say they believe in God.

And yet, Saul persecuted the Christians because they did not believe like him. He was killing people.

And Ananias, did you notice, he had preconceived ideas about Saul and wanted nothing to do with him at first? In verse 13 he says, "**I have heard reports about this man...**"

This reminds us that people who believe in God do not always do the right thing.

And it reminds us that it is the Lord who decides who is going to do what in the Lord's Body and kingdom. The Spirit of God, identifies, moves, and calls the instruments of the Lord's peace, those who are going to be in the Lord's work.

And it might not make logical sense to us.

But the Spirit calls and directs the part people are going to play, instruments in God's hands, in bringing peace, bringing love, pardon, unity, light and joy.

From our perspective, it is easy to see what Saul is doing (persecuting Christians) as hateful. It was hateful and violent.

We don't really see ourselves in Saul's actions. We are not hateful like Saul is hateful. And maybe we didn't come to faith in a dramatic way. So, we might want to check out of listening right now.

Which makes it all the more interesting that the Lord includes Ananias in Saul's story. He could have just been namelessly described as, "**a man full of the Holy Spirit came and healed Saul.**"

But it might be easier and necessary for us to see, connect with and relate to Ananias and his story.

He wanted nothing to do with Saul, Saul was killing people! And certainly, the degree and expression of the negative feelings that Ananias has towards Saul are way less harmful than Saul's murderous threats towards the Christians.

Maybe he grew in his faith, slowly and over the years. His journey was maybe peaceful and smooth, nothing like Saul's drama.

But notice with me, in both cases, in both Saul's heart and in Ananias' heart, the Lord moves.

The Lord seeks to overcome judgment and animosity and replace it with loving service, with connection for the sake of the gospel, God's greater project of love.

In both hearts.

The Lord didn't beat up Saul or bash Ananias. The Lord didn't blame or shame.

The Lord dramatically got their attention, sure. And then sought to move their hearts towards more grace and mercy, more loving service, to connection and a drawing together for the Lord's sake, for the building up of the Lord's Body.

Just as in the last two weeks of this series, it is in encounters with the risen Jesus (for Saul as a light and a voice, for Ananias, a voice in a vision) that meets them in their sin.

In either murderous hatred or snap judgment or being avoidant, fearful, and closed off. But the Lord didn't rub their faces in it, or embarrass them, and he didn't leave them there.

Instead, we see in both of their encounters with the risen Jesus, those encounters had the power to help them overcome, move past those sins and rise strong in doing life differently.

The Lord gently raises both Saul and Ananias up to be stronger, more connected, and even more faithful followers of Jesus, with new priorities and purpose of working together for the sake of the gospel.

Jesus tailors his interaction with both Saul and Ananias, it is different with each of the men.

Each grace-filled encounter was what each of them needed in the moment.

But also notice, they both receive instructions they alone must answer. Simon was to "get up and enter the city" in verse 6 and for Ananias, "Get up and go..." in verse 11.

If the Lord could overcome Saul's violent hatred and raise him up to become Paul, this central figure in early Christianity, is there any heart Jesus cannot bring change and growth to?

If the Lord could overcome Ananias' fear and avoidance, is there anyone Jesus cannot work through? Is there any heart too hardened by sin?

Sometimes we might hold on to our past mistakes, entangled in shame and regret, rehearsing our "worst" or seemingly unforgivable sins.

But I invite us to look at Saul's story and Ananias' story and how the Lord intervened for each of them, and continues to lead them forward.

I invite us to wonder and open our hearts before the Lord.

To ask maybe where Jesus is calling each of us to "get up and go" beyond our places of fear and judgment or comfort zone of control?

To ask for a current word, a current sense of direction in our lives.

How do you encourage the people in your life to continuously be responsive to the Lord's call upon their lives or to grow in becoming instruments of peace and love – particularly the people you fear or don't prefer?

Are there ways that you are prematurely condemning or judging others, and is it keeping you from seeing their God given potential?

Is there a point in our lives where we can stop listening for that call, for current guidance?

Friends, the story of Saul and Ananias reminds us that no heart is beyond the reach of God's grace – not the heart full of hatred, nor the heart full of fear.

And the same risen Jesus who met them in grace, wants to meet us in grace. Today. Now.

Jesus stands ready to meet us with mercy, invites us forward in loving forgiveness, and gives us the next step tailored specifically for our hearts to keep growing in loving service to the Lord and others.

So today, may we rise strong into that next step. Not in our own strength, but in the Spirit's strength, that comes from a gracious encounter with the living Christ.

May we become more and more instruments of loving service, just like Saul, just like Ananias.

Time of Reflection: So let me ask: Where might Jesus be gently saying to you, "Get up and go"? Is it in going deeper in prayer or stepping up to serve in a particular ministry? Is it in pressing into our community or serving Buffalo in some way?

Let's turn to the Lord and listen for his current word of guidance to our hearts.