

August 20 Lesson 12

Called to Preach

Devotional Reading: [1 Timothy 4:6-16](#)

Background Scripture: [Acts 9:1-31](#)

ACTS 9:10-20

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



“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

¹¹ The 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. ¹² In 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. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

¹⁵ But 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. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

¹⁷ 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.” ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

KEY VERSE

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!” “Yes, Lord,” he answered.—[Acts 9:10](#)

LESSON OUTLINE

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- A. Physicist Becomes a Preacher
- B. Lesson Background: Saul
- C. Lesson Background: Damascus

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- A. Saul Waits ([vv. 10-12](#))
Vision, Mirage, or Hindsight?
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The Foundation of Preaching

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- A. Faith and Obedience in Two Men
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Introduction

A. Physicist Becomes a Preacher

John Polkinghorne was one of the greatest British physicists of the twentieth century. He finished a doctorate at Cambridge University at age 25 and was invited to return to Cambridge to teach when he was 27. He participated in formulating the theory of the quark, a particle that is one of the building blocks of matter. He was one of the most brilliant men of his age. Yet after 25 years of this spectacular career in science, Polkinghorne left it all to train for the priesthood in the Church of England. He was ordained and eventually returned to Cambridge University in 1986 to serve as chaplain for Trinity Hall, one of the colleges of the university. The physicist became a preacher.

This week's lesson is about an even more dramatic career change.

B. Lesson Background: Saul

Saul, a Jew from Tarsus, had been trained as a rabbi by the best teachers in Jerusalem (compare [Acts 22:3](#)). His education in the law would have been the ancient equivalent of a doctoral degree today. When the Jewish leadership began to persecute Christians, Saul was their point man. We first see this in his leadership role in this regard in the stoning of Stephen ([7:58](#)).

Saul went on to terrorize the church by conducting house-to-house searches for Christians ([Acts 8:3](#); [22:4](#)). His persecuting zeal reached a fever pitch when he took the initiative to ask the high priest for authority to extend the persecution to Damascus, about 150 miles to the north of Jerusalem. His plan was to find Christians in the Jewish population there and bring them back to Jerusalem by force ([9:1, 2](#)). His encounter with the risen Christ is the immediate backdrop for today's lesson ([9:3-9](#)). Saul's ambitions and zeal had not gone unnoticed by the Lord of the church!

C. Lesson Background: Damascus

The site of today's lesson is the city of Damascus. In the Old Testament, this city is identified with the kingdom of Syria (or Aram), the sometime ally but often foe of ancient Israel (see [1 Kings 15:18](#)). Some claim that Damascus is the oldest continually inhabited site in the world. Indeed, the Bible notes its existence in the time of Abraham (see [Genesis 15:2](#)), and archaeological data extends back even further.

Damascus was important in the first century AD as a trading hub for caravan routes. It was a multiethnic city with a substantial Jewish population. These facts highlight the perceived need to extend persecution against Jewish Christians there. Threats to the "purity" of synagogues in Damascus could not be tolerated.

Saul's mission to this city changed, however, before he arrived there. As today's lesson opens, Saul is in his third day of blindness as a result of his encounter with Christ.

I. Disturbing Vision

([Acts 9:10-16](#))

A. Saul Waits ([vv. 10-12](#))

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

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

We gain a bit more information about this *disciple named Ananias* by consulting [Acts 22:12](#), where Paul (formerly the Saul of today’s lesson) describes Ananias as “a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there.” We take care, of course, not to confuse him with two others by the same name in [Acts 5:1](#) and [24:1](#).

Luke, the author of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, uses the word *disciple* dozens of times in his two works. In his Gospel, a disciple is a dedicated student of Jesus the teacher. In Acts, a disciple is a committed follower of the risen Lord. In that regard, Ananias may be much like many Christians today: serving the Lord faithfully in relative anonymity. How surprised Ananias must be, then, to experience *a vision* in which *the Lord* communicates with him personally!

The word *vision* implies seeing things not normally seen, but may also consist of hearing things not normally heard. The Lord’s communication with Samuel in [1 Samuel 3](#) is instructive. [Verse 15](#) calls the episode “the vision,” although Samuel apparently sees nothing (but hears plenty). The same seems to be the case here. Further, both instances involve the Lord’s calling the name of the one being spoken to. But unlike young Samuel, Ananias recognizes what is happening immediately. So he answers, “*Yes, Lord.*”

¹¹ The 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.

The divine communication with Ananias bears similarities to and differences from the divine communication with Cornelius in [Acts 10:1-6](#) (next week’s lesson). Both visions name the individual being addressed, name the person to be sought, and provide location of the latter. They are different in that Ananias is directed personally to *go*, while Cornelius is directed to “send men” to accomplish the assignment at hand.

When we consider the verse before us in light of [Acts 9:9](#), we realize that Saul’s “time-out” for prayer and fasting (while blind!) is in its third day.

Straight Street is a major east-west thoroughfare in Damascus. It is some 50 feet wide, with impressive gates at each end. It would be equivalent to the Broadway or High Street of some cities today, and a house on such a boulevard would be prestigious.

The Bible records no other facts about the particular *Judas* mentioned here. It is very unlikely that he is a Christian, but rather is one of the Jews in the city who expects to receive Saul and support his assignment from the high priest (see the Lesson Background). Ananias, as a Christian of Jewish background, likely knows of *the house of Judas* since the location of the man’s house on an important street is likely an indicator of his prominence and wealth. Judas is not an uncommon name at the time; therefore giving his address clarifies his identity.

¹² “In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

The Lord reveals to Ananias that a parallel vision has taken place. Saul is proceeding as instructed ([Acts 9:6](#)), and we notice irony in the fact that the blind Saul is privileged to have seen *in a vision* the pending arrival of Ananias for the purpose of restoring Saul’s eyesight.

The irony should not distract us from the crucial issue of Saul’s blindness. This trauma surely prompts deep soul searching on his part! The vital nature of his experience on the road to Damascus is seen in that its facts are recorded in three places in the book of Acts: chapters 9, 22, and 26. The crucial nature of what is taking place surely is not lost on Saul, even at this early point. Saul’s vision of Ananias undoubtedly gives hope. But on another level, it also deepens the mystery for the time being.

HOW TO SAY IT

Ananias *An-uh-nye-us*.

Cornelius *Cor-neel-yus*.

Damascus *Duh-mass-kus*.

Eusebius *You-see-be-us*.

Gentiles *Jen-tiles*.

Judas *Joo-dus*.

Messiah *Meh-sigh-uh*.

Nazareth *Naz-uh-reth*.

Pentecost *Pent-ih-kost*.

Tarsus *Tar-sus*.

Before moving on, we should note that the fact that Ananias is designated by name in Saul’s vision is important for at least a couple of reasons. First, the arrival of a man with that very name will be evidence for the divine source of the vision. Second, Saul will be able to inform the owner of the house of the pending arrival of Ananias so that the visitor will not be denied entrance.

VISION, MIRAGE, OR HINDSIGHT?



Constantine the Great was the Roman emperor from AD 306 to 337. During a time of unrest and civil war, he found himself leading an army against a larger force that had occupied Rome. The climactic battle, fought at Milvian Bridge on October 28, 312, was a decisive victory for Constantine, putting him firmly on the path to being uncontested as emperor.

The victory also led the pagan Constantine to be the first emperor of the Roman Empire to embrace Christianity. According to church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, this came about because of a vision Constantine allegedly had from Christ on the day before the battle. The claimed vision was that of the *Chi-Rho*, the first two letters of the word *Christ* in Greek, superimposed. This “trophy of a cross of light in the heavens” bore the inscription “Conquer by this.” Constantine did just that, after putting the *Chi-Rho* on the banners of his army.

Did the vision actually occur, or was it made up later to fit the facts of the battle’s outcome? It’s impossible to say. The Bible clearly establishes that God has used visions and dreams to communicate ([Genesis 41:15](#); [Numbers 12:6](#); etc.). But Scripture is equally clear regarding the problem of false visions ([Jeremiah 14:14](#); [23:16](#); [Ezekiel 13:6-9](#); etc.; compare [Deuteronomy 18:22](#)). Our lesson text—interesting in that God uses a vision of one man ([Acts 9:10](#)) to explain the vision of another man—records ironclad facts of history. Even so, [Hebrews 1:1, 2](#) sets forth a vital caution regarding claims of visions today: “In the past God spoke ... in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” —J. B. N.

B. Ananias Fears ([vv. 13, 14](#))

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.

Like others called, Ananias does not immediately accept his assignment (compare [Exodus 4:10-13](#)). He wants nothing to do with Saul, having heard two disturbing things about the man.

First, Saul’s reputation has preceded him, since Ananias knows of *all the harm* that this man has already done to the believers back in *Jerusalem*. The nature of this harm is outlined by the perpetrator himself years later: “I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished” ([Acts 26:10, 11](#)).

Ananias is saying that he knows that Saul has been a persecutor of the church. Implied in this is knowledge of Saul's complicity in the death of Stephen (see [Acts 7:58](#)). This too the repentant perpetrator admits to in due time (see [22:20](#)).

14. "And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

Second, Ananias also knows that Saul intends to do in Damascus what he has done in Jerusalem. The *authority from the chief priests* under which Saul operates does not result in an undercover endeavor. Rather, Saul's intentions seem to be a matter of common knowledge (compare [Acts 9:1, 2; 22:5; 26:12](#)). The concern of Ananias is understandable, given this man's track record.

C. The Lord Insists ([vv. 15, 16](#))

15. But 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.

The Lord does not allow fear to alter the assignment. Instead, Ananias is privileged to be made aware of the broad contours of the plan. And as history reveals, Saul (as Paul) does indeed end up presenting Christ *to the Gentiles* (example: [Acts 18:6-11](#)), *and their kings* (example: [26:1-29](#)), *and to the people of Israel* (example: [17:1-3](#)). The zeal with which Saul serves the high priest (see [Philippians 3:6](#)) is being redirected for the Lord's service.

Surely this prophetic word is an eye-opener for Ananias. Preaching Christ to the Israelites is understandable according to Jesus' own model ([Matthew 15:24](#); etc.), but by Saul of all people! Further, there is apparently no expectation of extending the gospel to Gentiles at this point in time (compare [Acts 11:18, 19](#)). The idea of witnessing to political rulers seems farfetched if [Daniel 2](#) is not called to mind.

16. "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

The man who has caused more suffering among Christians than any other will join their ranks as one who endures persecution (compare [2 Corinthians 11:23-28](#)). No more letters from high priests, but a commission from the Lord of the church (also [Acts 22:10; 26:15-18](#)). No more well-funded expeditions to arrest believers, but shoestring-budgeted missions to cities to make believers (see [1 Corinthians 9:7-12](#)). No more threats of murder for Jews who have become Christian, but plots against his own life (see [Acts 9:23-25; 23:12-22](#)).

II. Dramatic Visit

([Acts 9:17-20](#))

A. Ananias Obeys ([v. 17](#))

17. 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."

As Ananias encounters Saul, we should remember that Saul cannot see him. There is no indication that the two have ever met, so Ananias's voice is not familiar to Saul. We have to imagine that Saul is just as fearful as Ananias, if not more so! Saul may be doubting everything he has been taught and has believed to this point. His world is turned upside down. He has been waiting sightless for three days without eating or drinking anything ([Acts 9:9](#)).

No idle chitchat is recorded as Ananias seems to get immediately to the point of the visit. His willingness to touch Saul while addressing him as *Brother* seems to indicate that Ananias's fear has been at least partially allayed. We do not have to be completely without fear in order to obey. Fear grows when we sit and stew about what might happen. Fear is overcome by faith as faith is put into action.

The Lord Jesus is the focus of Ananias's pronouncement to Saul. It is Jesus who has granted the parallel visions of Ananias and Saul. This supernatural knowledge confirms again for Saul that the Lord is active in all of this. This is not demonic deception. The fact that the risen Jesus has sent Ananias to restore Saul's eyesight as predicted establishes that the man has not been abandoned.

But Ananias has also been sent for Saul to *be filled with the Holy Spirit*, something not recorded to have been made known to that man (see [v. 12](#), above). Only Luke of the New Testament authors uses the phrases "filled with the Holy Spirit" or "full of the Holy Spirit." In Luke's Gospel, this status is applied to John the Baptist ([Luke 1:15](#)), his parents ([1:41](#), [67](#)), and Jesus ([4:1](#)).

In the book of Acts, the same status characterizes the disciples on the Day of Pentecost ([Acts 2:4](#)), Peter on a later occasion ([4:8](#)), believers gathered for prayer ([4:31](#)), Stephen ([6:5](#); [7:55](#)), Barnabas ([11:24](#)), Saul (here and [13:9](#)), and unnamed disciples ([13:52](#)). The second of the two passages applied to Saul is accompanied by his name change from *Saul* to *Paul*. Further, there is significant irony in the fact that the context has the previously blinded Paul pronouncing blindness on an enemy of Christ ([13:9-11](#)).

B. Saul Sees ([vv. 18, 19a](#))

^{18, 19a}. Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

As Saul's blindness had been imposed instantaneously, so now is restoration of his sight. The word for what drops from his eyes is translated *scales*, indicating something like the scales of a fish. This does not mean that Saul has grown a fish-like skin over his eyes. The sense is of something that can be peeled off like the scales of a fish. It is as if a layer of skin that has covered his eyes is miraculously peeled away by the hand of God and falls to Saul's lap. This may indicate that Saul's eyesight was not damaged in and of itself, but has been blocked in a physical way as a result of his encounter with Christ on the Damascus road.

With this disabling condition removed, Saul wastes no time in receiving baptism. This likely is administered by Ananias, perhaps in the nearby Brada River. Saul is ready to go! The weakness

that results from a three-day fast is quickly reversed by a meal. But we notice that the thing of greater spiritual significance (baptism) comes first.

C. Synagogues Hear ([vv. 19b, 20](#))

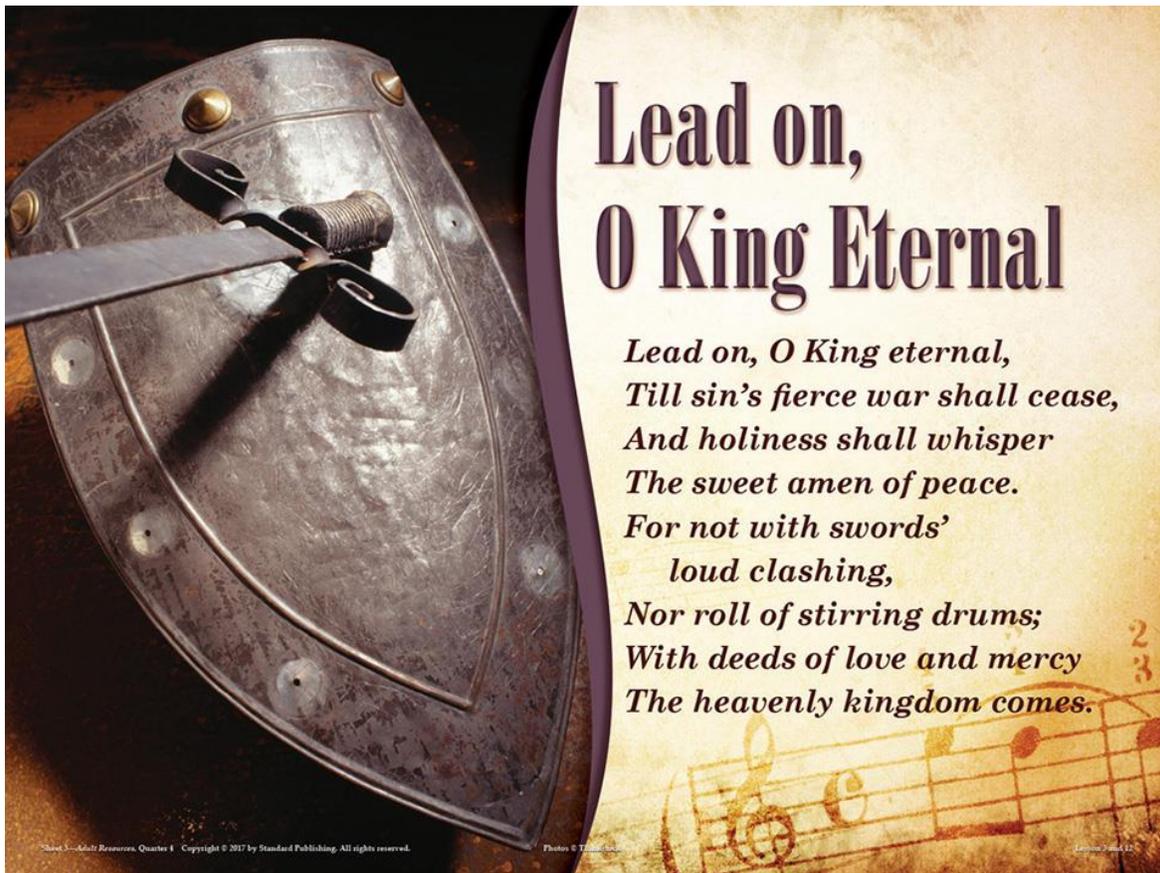
^{19b, 20}. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

The Jews of Damascus had expected Saul to come from Jerusalem and condemn those of their fellow Israelites who had embraced Christ. Instead, Saul begins to advocate the Christian message, *that Jesus is the Son of God*. So begins Saul's career as a preacher.

Conclusion

A. Faith and Obedience in Two Men

The dramatic events of [Acts 9](#) record how extreme God's action had to be for Saul to turn his attention to God's call. Saul was so obsessed with climbing the ladder of favor within the Jewish leadership ([Galatians 1:14](#)) that he did not recognize the legitimacy of the Christian message. He was spiritually blind to the fact that he was persecuting Jesus Christ, the risen Son of God.



**Lead on,
O King Eternal**

*Lead on, O King eternal,
Till sin's fierce war shall cease,
And holiness shall whisper
The sweet amen of peace.
For not with swords'
loud clashing,
Nor roll of stirring drums;
With deeds of love and mercy
The heavenly kingdom comes.*

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Visual for Lessons 3 & 12. "What has to happen for us to be aware of the deeds God expects of us?"

Saul, as Paul, went on to become the great apostle to the Gentiles. Christians of non-Jewish background owe him a great debt of gratitude, for he fought a somewhat lonely battle to gain an equal place in the church for people of all backgrounds. Even so, let us not forget the key role of the nearly anonymous Ananias, who was called by God to overcome his fears and minister to the church's greatest enemy at just the right time.

The voice of Ananias was part of the call of God for the one who came to be known as the apostle Paul. Nearly 30 years later, Paul mentioned this man by name ([Acts 22:12](#)). He never forgot this man of faith, a faith that overcame fear.

[Acts 9](#) is not intended as a pattern for how God brings people to faith, and the role of Paul as apostle was unique. Even so, God expects us at times to be his hands and feet, as was Ananias. May we overcome our fears as we answer that call.

B. Prayer

Lord, tune our spiritual eyes and ears to perceive the tasks you have for us. Grant us humility with courage as we embrace those tasks. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God's call is insistent and persistent.