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Acts 9:10-19
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Hearing God's Word in the Bible

After serving in the Navy, I moved to Seattle. There I lived in the inner-city in an intentional community which was a program through University Presbyterian Church. Six young adults, three men and three women, living in Christian community and learning how to reach out to our neighborhood with the love of Christ.

I was also volunteering as a youth leader in our church's high school youth ministry. While my day job was working as an engineer, I was very invested in our lives of students.

One night after discipling a group of young men, I dropped one of my friends off at his home. As was our custom, we prayed together. On this particular night, he asked if he could pray for me.

On my drive home, I heard "This is what you are supposed to do." I immediately understood that to be full-time ministry and began to sob, arguing with God about all the reasons it was wrong. What about my plans for the future? What about my career? What about my family and friends? What about my girlfriend Karen? Everything about it seemed wrong.

Somehow I ended up on Karen's doorstep still sobbing. We sat in my car for awhile until all I could simply say, "This is what I'm supposed to do."

Karen, who had no context of what I was talking about, replied, "I know."

You see not only had God been communicating to me about this call, but the Holy Spirit had been preparing Karen for the same thing. In her eyes, she already saw me as a full-time youth pastor who drew a paycheck from a secular career.

And here I am today, still living out that call.

In our Scripture, we hear a similar kind of dual communication by the Holy Spirit. Last week, Sarah preached the story of Saul's encounter with Jesus on the Road to Damascus. Today, we continue that story of how the Lord told a disciple named Ananias about Saul's conversion and how he should disciple him in his new faith in Jesus.

Please join me as we read from Acts 9:10-19.

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.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Could you imagine Ananias’ response to the Lord’s calling? “You want me to do what? Go where? To who? Do you know who this guy is Lord? Everything about this seems wrong. Maybe you should call someone else.”

As with my own story, sometimes when God speaks, it doesn’t always make sense. In fact it can be down right confusing. But hearing that another person has had similar visions, dreams, or thoughts can be a way to authenticate whether or not what we are hearing God.

Pete Greig in his book, *How to Hear God, A Simple Guide for Normal People* says that one of the most significant ways that we can discern God’s voice is by what we read in the Bible. The Bible IS God’s Word to us today. And through our hearing and reading of it, God speaks. This is why in our Reformed Christian Tradition, Scripture is always read and preached in the context of our worship services. Without those things, we wouldn’t be having church. Amen?

“Research shows that 78 percent of Americans own a physical copy of the Bible, but only 9 percent of them read it regularly.” Famous pollster George Gallup Jr. observed, “We revere the Bible, but don’t read it. It is the best-selling, least-read book in America.”¹

But why is that?

Well, for starters, I can admit that it can be hard to understand.

¹ Pete Greig, *How to Hear God, A Simple Guide for Normal People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 47.

It is very long.

It was written in a context very different from our own.

And it sometimes uses big words and concepts that can be difficult to grasp.

Pete Greig says, “There are two particular skills that every single Christian needs to develop, therefore, in order to hear God in and through holy Scripture. First, we must learn to read the Bible with our heads in order to understand what is actually, objectively, being said. And second, we must learn to read it with our hearts, in order to experience God’s voice through the pages.”²

This is why sometimes I try to bring some of the context to life by explaining what is going on in the culture or by breaking down some of the words in their original Greek or Hebrew languages. It helps us to understand with our heads. And then we can discern what God might be saying to our hearts which in biblical days was considered the seat of our emotions which causes us to do something or be something.

In our story today, clearly there was a lot going on. Saul had a reputation for persecuting followers of Jesus. And according to his faith, he had more than the right to do so. He said, “If anyone thinks that they have reason to put confidence in flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.”³ So he felt compelled to fight and protect his Jewish faith against these followers of Jesus who he thought were spreading heresy.

As we heard last week, he was breathing murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples and even went to the high priest and asked for letters to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found anyone belonging to the Way [which is what followers of Jesus were called at that time - before they were known as Christians] that he could take them prisoner to Jerusalem.⁴ There they would stand trial before the Sanhedrin for either acquittal or death.

No wonder Ananias in our story was so frightened of Saul when Jesus told him to go.

There are two things that this story brings to our attentions.

First, let us be careful of the soapboxes that we find ourselves on. Particularly those that are religiously oriented. God may call us to speak up against some sort of injustice. That is true. But God doesn’t need us to fight for him or to convince people that we are right and they are wrong. That is the Holy Spirit’s job.

² Pete Greig, *How to Hear God*, 48.

³ Philippians 3:4-6

⁴ Acts 9:1-2

When I look back during the pandemic, I think this is where some of our Brothers and Sisters in Christ got off track particularly when they felt that God was being threatened by all the restrictions placed on our right to assemble for worship. And so they got up on their religious soap box and either fought for it or just blatantly disregarded the restrictions. But folks, in those moments, our religious freedoms weren't being limited. Our health was being protected. And so some thought it was their duty, or their God given right, to fight against that government mandate.

As far as I understood Scripture, Jesus called us to love others enough to protect them from us spreading the virus to one another before we had proper protection. We were never restricted in our ability to worship, it just meant we had to do so for a time online as opposed to in person, in the comfort and safety of our homes.

Likewise, Saul was wrong in taking up the charge and persecuting members of the Way as he did. And Jesus held him accountable for it. Not only would Jesus use him for carrying his name to the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel, but he would also show Saul how much he would have to suffer for his name.⁵

The second thing that this shows is that no-one is outside the bounds of God's grace, God's love and God's purpose. Notice that even though Saul was doing all of these horrific things to dissuade people against following Jesus, Jesus still loved him enough to reach out, stop him from causing further harm, and redirect him toward something positive.

Jesus never wrote Saul off.

And if Jesus never wrote Saul off, then we shouldn't write people off either. Not even our enemies. No matter how crazy, how zealous, how politically weird, or just plain evil they may seem. God still loves them. And Jesus commands us to do the same.

I love how faithful Ananias was to the Word of God which came to him in a vision.

"Ananias!" The Lord called him by name.

Have you ever had the Lord call you by name? Either as a warning from doing something harmful? Or as a way to get your attention?

This has happened to me on occasion where I was drifting off to sleep while reading or doing sermon preps that I hear "Chris!" And it wakes me up or redirects my attention. It's not an audible voice. No one else would have heard it. But clearly, in my head, I know that my name is being called.

⁵ Acts 9:15

In the same way, the Lord called Ananias by name to get his attention in order to convey some very important instructions. Notice that these were not vague but precise, specific, and direct. No room for questions. No need for interpretation. They just required plain obedience, even though they made no rational sense.

“Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street [of Damascus] and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.”

One commentator wrote, “Damascus was the nearest most important city to Jerusalem, outside the Holy Land. Today it is in modern day Syria. It was about 150 miles away and the journey would have taken someone about four to six days. Straight Street probably followed the same route of the long, straight street that runs through the city today, in contrast to the many crooked streets of the city. In fact, this name was given to any route in antiquity extending in a straight course across the city.”⁶ I would equate this to most cities in America have a Main Street that runs through the center of town.

Ananias would have known exactly where to go and for whom he was looking.

I love that about Scripture and how God speaks to us through it. True sometimes I can be confusing, but other times it is precise, specific, and direct.

But Scripture can speak to us differently in different seasons of life. One passage that I read five years ago, could say something very different to me today, as it will five years from now. Pete Greig in his book uses the example of how differently Rembrandt painted the scene of Jesus being presented in the temple as a baby. This was when Simeon took Jesus in his arms and declared God’s goodness in letting him see Jesus, the Messiah, before he died.

In 1631, Rembrandt painted *Simeon’s Song of Praise* as a younger man. Notice how he emphasized the grandness of the temple, the costumery, and the admiring crowd. But here it is much later in life, thirty eight years later, in 1669 when he painted it again as *Simeon in the Temple*. Here, Rembrandt drew attention to the old face of Simeon and the innocent wonder of baby Jesus. Greig says, “Here we see an old man, done with the theatrics of kingly courts, gazing past the face of the baby, his mouth ajar as if sighing or preparing to pray.”⁷

Two very different interpretations of the same scripture in different seasons of life.

One of the things that Greig says is very important as we read scripture and listen for God’s Word is the hermeneutic that we use. Hermeneutic is a big theological term that simply means the lens through which we translate or interpret

⁶ Study notes 9:2 and 9:5 found in the *NIV Archeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 1782.

⁷ Greig, *How to Hear God*, 52.

Scripture. Sort of like putting on a pair of reading or sunglasses, which can either help or hinder us in being able to see more clearly.

Some people use a covenantal lens through which they see Scripture. Others use a feminist lens. And still others use a liberation lens. What Greig encourages us to use in order to hear God clearly is a christological lens. In other words, everything we read, whether in the Old or New Testament should be read through the perspective of Jesus Christ.

Greig describes this as both radical and exciting. “Radical in that it gets right to the root of Christian faith.” And exciting in that it enables us “catch glimpses and hear whispers of our Lord on every page of the Bible.”⁸

This morning in our Adult Sunday school class we heard from Sister Mary Magdelene, a modern day nun in contemporary England who begins her day with Lectio Divina or God inspired reading of Scripture. Through this practice, she expects to have a daily encounter with the living Jesus himself. As she reads the Word, meditates on the Word, prays on the Word, and contemplates the Word, God speaks.

My friends, imagine if we came to our own times of daily Scripture reading with such expectation!

At this point I want to make a plug for the Women’s Bible Study that is starting up tomorrow. You have two options at 9am or 6pm. Together you will study Laurie Polich Short’s, *Faith, Doubt and, God’s Mysterious Timing*. And then our Men’s Once Monthly Bible Study and Breakfast will be starting up next Saturday at 7:30am. These are wonderful opportunities to hear God’s voice as we discern it through Scripture with one another.

In closing, I want to share the story of St. Augustine of Hippo.⁹ During the fourth century, Augustine was one of the most influential church fathers paving the way for much of Christian thought today. But he wasn’t always so devout. In fact he was just the opposite. He rejected the Christian faith of his mother and went on to live a wild and licentious life, chasing after the world and its ways.

Upon moving to Milan, he worked as a professor and he met a guy named Ambrose who was the renowned bishop of the city. Augustine was attracted to Ambrose’s preaching and one day as he was wrestling with the emptiness of his worldly life, he heard the voice of a young boy or girl singing nearby, “Take it and read. Take it and read.”

Augustine understood this to mean the Bible, which he then randomly opened to a passage of Scripture which convicted him to put away his immoral life and put on the character of Christ. Like Saul, in our story today, something like scales fell

⁸ Greig, *How to Hear God*, 54

⁹ Ibid 56-69

from his eyes, and he could see clearly God's love as if for the first time. In fact, St. Augustine of Hippo went on to proclaim, "The whole Bible does nothing but tell us of God's love."

So, my friends, if we want to hear from God, we need to be more intentional about placing ourselves where we can feast upon the Word of God with others. And I challenge you to commit to either of these new Bible studies this week. As we do so, may we always come to Scripture with fresh expectations that we will encounter the living Jesus who said, 'My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me.'¹⁰ And may the Holy Spirit open our ears and hearts to hear what the Lord Jesus tells us.

Amen.

¹⁰ John 10:27