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ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON:

# GOD'S CALL & DIFFICULT DECISIONS

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: ACTS 9:1-18

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### BIBLE BACKGROUND

THIS IS THE STORY OF SAUL'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE RISEN CHRIST ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS AND OF HIS SUBSEQUENT MEETING WITH A CHRISTIAN NAMED ANANIAS. IT IS ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL STORIES OF THE MYSTERIOUS AND LIFE-CHANGING POWER OF GOD IN ALL OF SCRIPTURE, MADE MORE SO BECAUSE OF THE IMPORTANT ROLE THAT SAUL PLAYED IN THE EARLY CHURCH AND BECAUSE OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HIS LETTERS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. THE STORY OF HIS VISION OF JESUS WAS AN IMPORTANT MOTIF IN PAUL'S — AS SAUL THE JEW WAS KNOWN TO HIS GREEK-SPEAKING AUDIENCE — OWN PREACHING (E.G., ACTS 22:6-16; GAL 1:13-17; CF. 1 COR 15:8-9; PHIL 3:4-7). IT OCCUPIES A LARGE PLACE AS WELL IN THE CHURCH'S UNDERSTANDING OF CONVERSION AND OF VOCATION.

THE SAME STORY, HOWEVER, ILLUSTRATES BEAUTIFULLY HOW GOD'S CALL OPERATES IN AND THROUGH A COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS. AT THE SAME TIME THAT A NEWLY REPENTANT SAUL WAS PRAYING, GOD WAS PREPARING ANANIAS TO GIVE EXPLANATION AND ENCOURAGEMENT TO SAUL. JUST AS SAUL NEEDED THE GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT OF HIS NEW BROTHERS AND SISTERS, ANANIAS, AND PROBABLY THE OTHER BELIEVERS IN DAMASCUS, NEEDED GOD'S HELP TO RECEIVE THEIR FORMER ADVERSARY INTO THEIR FELLOWSHIP. THE CALL OF GOD, WHICH EXTENDS TO ALL, LEADS THE FAITHFUL INTO PATHS OF GREATER KNOWLEDGE AND SERVICE — AND ALSO VULNERABILITY.

**9:1 – “Meanwhile”:** Both the NRSV and NIV begin the passage the same way. In fact, the temporal relationship between this story and those that precede and follow it is not certain. Perhaps they took place one after the other, or perhaps they happened at roughly the same time. Tannehill suggests that the stories of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), Saul and Ananias, and Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1-48) are a group of three “unlikely convert” stories [Robert Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. II, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990, p. 113, with note to Beverly Roberts Gaventa's “Overthrown Enemy.”]. The preaching of the gospel to these three — an African eunuch, a Hellenistic Jewish antagonist, and a Roman centurion — signals a new widening of the church's ministry.

**9:2 – “letters to the synagogues at Damascus”:** Some mistakenly characterize the stoning of Stephen and subsequent events as Jewish persecution of Christians. If this were true, then why would Saul have expected to find Christians in the synagogues? In fact, Christianity was still considered a sect or branch of Judaism. Jewish believers in Jesus continued to practice their faith and to follow the Law, but they also proclaimed Jesus, the crucified preacher from Nazareth, as the Messiah and Son of God. This is also why we find a variety of references to Christ's disciples in Acts: “the church” (8:1), “[those] who belonged to the Way” (9:2), “saints” (9:13), “all who invoke [Jesus'] name” (9:14), and finally “Christians” (11:26).

**9:5 – “Who are you, Lord?”:** The Hebrew word for “lord,” *’adonai*, and its Greek equivalent, *kurios*, are both forms of address for God — whose proper name no devout Jew would pronounce — and terms of respect, sort of like the English “sir.” Saul obviously knows this is no ordinary encounter, but his response shows uncertainty about the identity of the person in his vision. Later in the story, the narrator reports that “the Lord” spoke to Ananias (9:10).

When Ananias finally meets Saul, he leaves no doubt about the originator of both visions: “the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me” (9:17).

**9:9 – “For three days and nights”:** Fasting was both a symbol of mourning and of repentance, and Luke reports that Jesus fasted in the wilderness prior to his public ministry (Luke 4:2). In addition, Robert Wall notes that the time period may reflect the three days of Jesus’ entombment [Robert Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. X (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), p. 151]. Saul is, in effect, dead until Ananias comes and revives him with the promise of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17).

**9:10 – “Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias”:** The narrator reports that the persecution in Jerusalem scattered the believers throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1), but there is no recorded mission to the neighboring province of Syria, of which Damascus was the chief city. In keeping with the theological perspective of Acts, though, this suggests that there were other, unnamed Christians already carrying the gospel “to the ends of the earth” (1:8). For any reader, it is a reminder that God is working even when we are not aware.

**9:10 – “The Lord said to him in a vision”:** Double or complementary visions also play a role in the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10. They emphasize not only the divine origin of the mission but also the scope and complexity of God’s plan. They also demonstrate the ways that Jesus, now ascended but present through the Holy Spirit, continues to play an active role in the church.

**9:13 – “But Ananias answered”:** The initial response of a prophet or a servant of God to a call from God is not always positive. The banner example is Moses, who objected not once but four times (Ex. 3:13; 4:1,10,13). The judges Barak and Gideon (Judges 4:8; 6:15), the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah (Isa. 6:5; Jer. 1:6), and Mary the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:34) all asked questions or raised doubts about what God was asking them to do. In the end, though, they all lived up to their vocations.

**9:15 – “He is an instrument whom I have chosen”:** The same word translated “chosen” describes the choosing of the twelve apostles, the seven “deacons,” and those chosen in Jerusalem to bear the letter to Antioch (Luke 6:13; Acts 6:5, 15:22) [Tannehill, p. 118]. Its use here reinforces the characterization of Saul as someone with an important task to fulfill.

**9:19 – “after taking some food”:** Food was highly symbolic in the ancient world, and how and with whom people ate were indications of ethnic, religious, and social distinctions. Food was the subject of the first argument in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:1), and Paul attacked the Corinthians for their inequitable eating habits (1 Cor. 11:17-22). If this passage suggests that Saul and Ananias ate together, then it indicates not only that Saul had fully recovered but also that he was fully included by the believers in Damascus.

#### INTRODUCTION – “CONVERGING LINES OF FAITHFULNESS” (10 MINUTES)

Dr. James Fowler, author and theologian, used the term “converging lines of faithfulness” in a lecture to describe the way in which God can use the lives and choices of individuals, sometimes without their realizing it, to bring about the greater purposes of God. Take a few minutes and trace out your own lines of faithfulness. Instruct class members to cluster into groups of four or five and to discuss their faith connections (Resource Sheet A). Ask, “Which important people brought you to faith in Jesus? How did you come to this church? To this Sunday School class? What books have you read that have shaped the way you think and act? What hymns express your faith most powerfully?” Find out how many connections there are within the class.

#### READ THE TEXT – ACTS 9:1-19A (5 MINUTES)

Give a brief introduction to the passage, emphasizing its position in Acts between the persecution of the church in Jerusalem and the conversion of Cornelius. In other words, it comes at the beginning of the main missionary stage of the church. Read the passage aloud or have a class member read it.

## ENGAGE THE TEXT (25 MINUTES)

Allow time for class members to ask questions and to make observations if they so desire. If they are hesitant to engage the passage, ask some of the following questions:

1. What evidence did Saul have that this experience was really from God?
2. How do you think Saul reacted to Jesus' characterization of him as a persecutor?
3. What might have been going through Saul's mind during his three days of blindness?
4. This Ananias is only mentioned in this story in Acts. What else might we like to have known about him?
5. How does this story compare with other miracle stories in the Gospels? With other "conversion" stories in Scripture (e.g., Jonah, Zacchaeus)?

After class members are sufficiently familiar with the contours of the text, refocus the class with these questions (Resource Sheet B):

1. What choices did Saul face after his encounter with Jesus?
2. How might these choices have affected the way he was perceived by other Jews?
3. How might Ananias' decision to help Saul have been perceived by the other disciples in Damascus?
4. What are some difficult choices that Christians in our culture face?

## REFLECT AND APPLY THE TEXT (20 MINUTES)

Choose one of the following options for reflection and application.

### A. Whom do we include?

Instructions: Ananias faced a tough choice in reaching out to a known opponent of the early church. Certain groups in our culture have been the subjects of heated debate, high emotions, and even controversial legislation. As a whole class or in small groups of three or four, consider what you think would be a Christ-like response in the following situations:

- a. You are sitting in the church office one day when a mother with two small children comes to your church asking for assistance. She wears the hijab, the headscarf common to many Muslim cultures. She speaks only a little English, but it is clear that she is asking for money for food.
- b. You are serving on the building and grounds committee, and your church hires a contractor to do repairs on its parking lot. When the crew shows up for work on Monday, you notice that most of the workers are Hispanic and speak to one another exclusively in Spanish. The next day you receive a call from a fellow committee member who is concerned that the workers may be undocumented and may have entered the country illegally.
- c. A small apartment complex, whose patrons are mostly working-class singles and single parents, sits about a block from your church. As you are walking past your church's nursery area one Sunday, you overhear two congregants speaking about one of the residents. One claims to have learned that a new resident is a convicted sex offender. She is concerned about the safety of the church's children.

### B. Suffer for the sake of my name.

Instructions: Write the phrase "Suffer for the Sake of My Name" on a chalkboard or sheet of paper visible to the whole class. Break the class into two groups, and assign each one of the following discussion topics.

- a. How do we as Christians suffer for Jesus' name's sake? Why do we suffer for Jesus' name?
- b. How do Christians cause Jesus' name to suffer? In what ways do we misuse or misappropriate the name of Jesus?

Bring the groups back together at the end to discuss their findings.

### C. Visions of change.

Materials: old magazines and newspapers, scissors, poster board, glue or glue sticks

Instructions: As many commentators and historians have noted, we live in an increasingly image-driven society. This presents challenges as well as opportunities for the church as it seeks to communicate the gospel and to shape the lives of believers. Break the class into two groups, and provide each with old magazines and newspapers, scissors, a piece of poster board, and glue or glue sticks. Give each group one of the following two assignments:

- a. Look for images that you think represent and shape our contemporary culture. You can consider areas such as politics, entertainment, business and industry, consumerism, or family life. Cut these out, and mount them on the poster board.
- b. Look for images that you think could represent the message of the gospel in our contemporary culture. The images may or may not be explicitly religious. Cut these out and mount them on poster board.

Once the groups have completed their work, have them present their images to the whole group. Compare and contrast the two sets of images. Of those images that represent our culture, could any be used to present the message of the gospel? Of those images that depict themes of the gospel, how are they still shaped by our culture?

### SPECIAL FOLLOW-UP OPPORTUNITY

As a way to stimulate conversation about calling and vocation within your church, consider the following special session, either as an alternative to Sunday School or as a special program on a Wednesday or Sunday evening. Arrange for an adult and a youth Sunday School class to meet together, preferably in a neutral gathering space. Have each group prepare beforehand.

Youth should prepare questions for the adults about the adults' sense of God's call in their lives. Questions might include: How does your work fit into your understanding of God's call for you? Are there tasks or roles that you feel called to that are not part of your professional life? Have you ever felt called to a specific task or mission? If so, how old were you, and what were the circumstances? How did you respond? At what times in your life has it been easier or harder for you to hear and to respond to God's call?

Adults should prepare individual, handwritten notes to the youth that they know. These notes should focus on gifts that the adults recognize in the youth (e.g., charity, leadership, creativity, interest in children, compassion for older adults, public speaking, etc.) and on ways that the adults could envision the youth using their gifts.

The youth should ask their questions to the adults first in a panel format so that all adults have a chance to respond if they wish. Allow youth to ask follow-up questions if they do not understand a response. Once the questions are through, have the adults give their personal notes to the youth, which the youth will take with them.

# RESOURCE SHEET A - “CONVERGING LINES OF FAITHFULNESS”

Consider the following questions with your class members. Find out what connections you share.

- Which important people brought you to faith in Jesus?
- How did you come to this church? To this Sunday School class?
- What books have you read that have shaped the way you think and act?
- What hymns express your faith most powerfully?

# RESOURCE SHEET B - “ENGAGE THE TEXT”

Answer the following questions about Acts 9:1-19a.

1. What choices did Saul face after his encounter with Jesus?
2. How might these choices have affected the way he was perceived by other Jews?
3. How might Ananias' decision to help Saul have been perceived by the other disciples in Damascus?
4. What are some difficult choices that Christians in our culture face?