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They could be right in front of you...



YOUTH SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON:

GOD'S CALL & HARD CHOICES

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. Because of the dramatic and memorable nature of Saul's experience, the story occupies a large place in the church's understanding of conversion and of vocation. However, even though Saul is the main character in Acts, Ananias plays an equally important role in this story. Both men had to make some tough choices and had to step out on faith in order to obey God.

Be sure that youth understand that Saul is the same person as the apostle Paul who wrote a number of letters in the New Testament. His name didn't change; he probably went by a Hebrew name (Saul) among his Jewish contemporaries, and by a Greek name (Paul) among his Greek-speaking Gentile associates. Also, remind students that the book of Acts has the same author as the Gospel of Luke and that it picks up the story of Jesus' disciples after Easter.

It may be useful to have a map available to show students the locations of Jerusalem – where the apostles had gathered and where Saul was present for the stoning of Stephen – Damascus, and Tarsus. Point out that the ministry of Jesus took place in a very small geographic area: Galilee and the towns surrounding Jerusalem. It was Paul and the apostles who carried the story of Jesus across the ancient world.

The notion of a vision may arouse skepticism in some youth, whose ability to accept stories of the miraculous uncritically may be diminishing. Rather than arguing about what actually happened, point out that what is equally, if not more, miraculous about this story is the extent to which Saul – and Ananias to some degree – changed as a result of his experience. Saul was a different person with a new understanding of God after his vision, and that was his testimony throughout his life (e.g., Acts 22:6-16; Gal. 1:13-17; cf. 1 Cor. 15:8-9; Phil. 3:4-7).

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, at the time depicted in this story Christianity was still considered a sect or branch of Judaism. After all, both Saul and Ananias (Hebrew – Hananiah) were Jewish names. 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. It was this insistence on the identity of Jesus, as well as the inclusion of Gentiles into the church, that deepened the rift between Jews and Christians. That did not happen until a generation or two later. This is one reason 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).

9:10 – “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.

9:13 – “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) [Robert, Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. II (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p. 118]. Its use here reinforces the characterization of Saul as someone with an important task to fulfill.

INTRODUCTION – IS THIS SEAT TAKEN? (10 MINUTES)

Finding a seat on a crowded school bus can be one of the most unnerving experiences in a young person’s life. Play this funny game to reward those who pay attention to the needs of others and who show hospitality. Before class starts, place pairs of chairs in a column facing one direction or, if there are enough students and enough space, in two columns with a center aisle. These are the seats on the bus. Choose three students to board the bus (or one if numbers are fewer) and have the other students take seats on the bus, such that no one is sitting beside anyone else.

Prepare slips of paper with wacky characteristics (Resource Sheet A), and hand one to each of the three new boarders. Instruct them to board the bus, one by one, and to ask to sit with a rider while demonstrating their special trait. The boarders can talk and can demonstrate their special trait, but they cannot say what it is. The seated riders will try to guess what is different about each boarder. If a rider can guess, he or she will say something like, “Sure, girl who walks like a chicken, you can sit with me.” If the rider guesses correctly, the boarder sits down, and the rider gets off the bus and chooses a new trait to model. Play until everyone has had a chance to get on the bus.

Conclude by asking:

- What was it like to need someone to make a place for you?
- What was it like to have to pay attention to what someone else needed?
- Which did you find easier? Why?

READ THE TEXT – ACTS 9:1-18 (5-10 MINUTES)

Give a brief introduction to the text. Prompt students to remember where Acts is in the Bible, who wrote it, what it’s about, and who Saul was. Read it aloud, or have one or more students read it.

ENGAGE THE TEXT (15 MINUTES)

Allow time for class members to ask questions or to make observations about the text if they so desire. Refocus them with the following questions (Resource Sheet B). You may omit the first three if youth are already familiar with the story.

1. Why was Saul on his way to Damascus? (*A: to round up Christians and to bring them back to Jerusalem*)
2. Of what did Jesus accuse Saul? What is peculiar about the phrasing of the accusation?
(*A: Jesus said Saul was persecuting him, not just his followers.*)
3. Why did Ananias object to helping Saul?
(*A: Saul was a known persecutor of the church and was in Damascus to round up Christians.*)
4. What kinds of life choices did Saul face after his encounter with Christ? Which of these choices might have put him at odds with his Jewish friends and associates? (*e.g.: Christian baptism, fellowship with other Christians, belief in Jesus as God’s Son, future career as evangelist and missionary*)

5. What choices did Ananias face after his vision? Which of these choices might have put him at odds with his fellow Christians? (e.g.: *helping an enemy of the church, introducing him to other Christians and putting them at risk*)
6. What are some circumstances that make it easier to do the right thing? When is it hard to do the right thing? Can you think of other biblical stories in which someone had to do something difficult or risky to obey God? Who helped them in those situations?

REFLECT AND APPLY THE TEXT (25-30 MINUTES)

Choose one of the following three options for reflection and application.

A. BUILD A CHURCH

Materials: large sheet of butcher paper, markers

Instructions: Draw a large, church-shaped outline on a piece of butcher paper. Give students markers and instruct them to write down all of the people that it takes to make a church (or their church) function (e.g., pastor/preacher, musicians, singers, teachers, students, people to open doors, people to hand out bulletins, etc.). Once they have a sufficiently large list, allow them to take a few moments and then underline the jobs that they have done. Then have them circle the jobs that they think they might be able to do. If time allows, have them choose one job each that they think one of their classmates might be able to do. Discuss their results, and point out that God calls many people to many different roles.

B. FALLING SCALES

Materials: cardstock or construction paper; scissors; crayons, markers, and/or oil pastels; pens and pencils; small basket or box

Instructions: There are many aspects of life that can keep a person from seeing his or her path. It can be peer pressure, the need to fit in, the attempt to rebel, a tendency to lie or to conceal the truth, fear and anxiety, or simply avoiding reality. Ask youth to design pairs of “scales” to represent those things that blind them. The scales need to be at least as large as an egg for the purposes of this project. Have youth draw on one side of the scales, adding as much detail as they wish. Then have youth list on the other side of the scales some things in life that bind, blind, or keep them from “seeing” clearly.

To begin a time of prayerful confession, have the youth hold their scales over their eyes. Ask them to pray individually for God’s guidance in their lives and for the ability to let go of those things that hinder them from following God’s call. After a few moments of silent prayer, read Acts 9:17-18a. When Paul’s scales fall from his eyes, conclude the prayer by saying, “Amen.” Have youth remove their scales and place them in a box or basket as a sign of their commitment to follow God’s direction in their lives.

C. WHAT’S NEWSWORTHY?

Materials: poster board, paper, pens/pencils, colored pencils, scissors, glue sticks or glue

Instructions: This is a collaborative activity in which youth imaginatively explore the story of Saul and Ananias. The finished project will be a front page layout on poster board of the [Your Church Name] Herald.

First, assign roles to the group members. Two will take the roles of Saul and Ananias, and the rest will serve as reporters, sketch artists, and editors. Resource Sheets C, D, E, and F give instructions to the newspaper staff.

Next, instruct youth to reexamine the text from Acts to find out what’s newsworthy. What in this story is worth telling and worth telling to a VERY large audience? What do people need to hear? What strikes them as the pivotal moment in the story? What makes these people tick?

Finally, have the reporters interview Saul and Ananias and write up brief reports (about a paragraph each). Sketch artists will draw an important scene or scenes from the story. Editors will write headlines and lay out the front page. Because of the time involved in this project, consider allowing the staff to finish the following week if necessary.

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 - WACKY TRAITS

Walk like a chicken

Hair is on fire

Think you're Elvis

Dying of thirst

Can only turn left

One-man band

Shoes are filled with helium

Riding on a lawnmower

Can only speak in rhymes

Think you're a ninja

Afraid your teeth are going to fall out

RESOURCE SHEET B - ENGAGE THE TEXT

Answer the following questions about Acts 9:1-18.

REMEMBER

1. Why was Saul on his way to Damascus?
2. Of what did Jesus accuse Saul? What is peculiar about the phrasing of the accusation?
3. Why did Ananias object to helping Saul?

CONSIDER

4. What kinds of life choices did Saul face after his encounter with Christ? Which of these choices might have put him at odds with his Jewish friends and associates?
5. What choices did Ananias face after his vision? Which of these choices might have put him at odds with his fellow Christians?

RESPOND

6. What are some circumstances that make it easier for you to do the right thing? When is it hard to do the right thing?
7. Can you think of other biblical stories in which someone had to do something difficult or risky to obey God? Who helped them in those situations? Resource Sheet C – What's Newsworthy?

RESOURCE SHEET C - WHAT'S NEWSWORTHY?

Reporter/Reporting

Team 1:

Your assignment is to interview Saul. You'll need to consult the recording of the story in Acts to develop your questions. Ask three (or more) probing questions in the short time you have. Be thorough and make sure you have time to write the story with your fellow reporters before the copy deadline. We've got to get this paper to press!

Question 1:

Question 2:

Question 3:

RESOURCE SHEET D - WHAT'S NEWSWORTHY?

Reporter/Reporting

Team 2:

Your assignment is to interview Ananias. You'll need to consult the recording of the story in Acts to develop your questions. Ask three (or more) probing questions in the short time you have. Be thorough and make sure you have time to write the story with your fellow reporters before the copy deadline. We've got to get this paper to press!

Question 1:

Question 2:

Question 3:

RESOURCE SHEET E - WHAT'S NEWSWORTHY?

Sketch Artist

The challenge before you is to create the most visually appealing scene from the account in Acts. You can consult the recording of the story in Acts to begin the process as well as accompany one or both of the reporters (or reporting team) in order to better visualize the story. Remember, this is FRONT PAGE coverage the editing team needs. Thorough, accurate, timely—that's what we need. We've got to get this paper to press!

RESOURCE SHEET F - WHAT'S NEWSWORTHY?

Editor/Editing Team

Use the art from the sketch artists and the articles from the reporters to create the best cover in this paper's history! Write headlines, and lay out the material on poster board in an attractive and compelling way. Remember, time is of the essence. Once you have the final edit, you must present the final copy to members of the paper for review. Bonuses are in this if we sell in the millions, so get busy!