

“DOES HE KNOW?”

(Narnia 17)

Acts 9:10-19a (p. 1065)

“*Off my back, children,*” said Aslan. And they both tumbled off. Then with a roar that shook all Narnia from the western lamppost to the shores of the eastern sea, the great beast flung himself upon the white witch. Lucy saw her face lifted towards him for one second with an expression of terror and amazement... And Peter’s army cheered, and the newcomers roared, and the enemy squealed and gibbered till the wood re-echoed with the din of that onset.

“The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe” – Chapter 17

And so we come to the end of our story. The book can be treated as a children’s tale, nothing more – and many people do. But taken in another way (the way I think C. S. Lewis intended it to be taken) it is the story of coming to faith. The children returned to England. And, like those who come to know Christ, simply to look at them, they appeared much the same. But on the inside they would never be the same. But of the four, I suspect that Edmund was the closest to C. S. Lewis’ heart. I say that because, in some ways, he was so much like the young C. S. Lewis before his conversion.

You remember that, as Aslan was making Edmund a Knight there on the field of battle, Lewis had Lucy raise what may be the central question posed by the book. She whispered to Susan, “*Does he know what Aslan did for him... what the arrangement with the Witch really was?*” Aslan took his place. Did he know that? Was it important that he know? Those questions got me to thinking about Saul of Tarsus. Did he know from the start what Jesus had done for him? Of course he knew later on – as the Apostle Paul. That was the very heart of his message. But when did he first understand the arrangement that Jesus had made to take his place, to bear his guilt? When did it all “come together?” We think of Saul’s experience on the Damascus road and assume that that was where his life was turned around. But I can’t help but wonder what would have happened to Saul if Ananias had never come to him?

I believe what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus wasn’t so much a sudden conversion as it was a sudden surrender. In one violent stroke, this powerful man was brought to his knees. Then he was led by the hand to a home in Damascus, where for three days he pondered his fate in the dark solitude of blindness, without food or drink.

Meanwhile, in that city a man named Ananias was having his own disturbing encounter with the Lord in a vision. And though the message was rather cryptic, it was clear that Saul had evidently had some sort of “accident” on the way, and that he had been taken to the home of a man named Judas where he had remained for three days, blind and apparently harmless. But then the Lord went on to say that Saul was expecting Ananias, of all people, to pay him a visit.

Now I can imagine that Ananias’ first impression would have been one of great relief. Here the Lord had miraculously intervened on behalf of his people to strike down their approaching enemy. But I can see Ananias having second thoughts. What if Saul’s alleged “accident” wasn’t just some sort of clever trap. Notice how Ananias responded to the news. He said: “*Now, Lord, I’ve heard reports about this man...*”

But despite his understandable misgivings, God’s response was as brief as it was emphatic. In verse 15 the Lord said to Ananias, “*GO!*” ~ Then he graciously added: “*(Ananias,) this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.*” (That is to say: “*Ananias, just do your job – and leave the rest to me.*”)

Now, let me make three brief observations about this remarkable man named Ananias that I think are worthy of note. I want you to note his **courage**, his **grace**, and his **vision**.

1. First, consider the **courage** it took to go to Saul. The risk must have seemed immense. Common sense was yelling at Ananias to steer clear of this madman. Notice in the text that absolutely nothing had been said, to this point, about Saul having had any kind of change of heart – either on the road or afterward. True, Saul had had a traumatic encounter with the Lord, a vision of Christ that had left him shaken and blind – perhaps even broken in spirit.

But for all Ananias knew, Saul was like a vicious, wild animal that was temporarily tranquilized by the trauma. But once it wore off, Saul might very well resume his bloody crusade, with absolutely no warning. And, of course, Ananias was putting himself right in his path. Don’t underestimate the courage it took for Ananias to overcome his fear of the unknown – to tell Saul about Jesus. But, thank God, he did.

2. Second, it not only took great courage to overcome his fear, it took great **grace** to overcome his prejudices. But Ananias had the sort of character that proved our Lord’s choice of Ananias to be the right one. When he approached Saul for the first time, you can see a reflection of the way Jesus dealt with people. Think back.

Think about the incident in John’s Gospel involving that woman caught in adultery. Jesus didn’t say to her, “*Go and sin no more. Then you can come back*

and I'll consider forgiving you." No, he said, *"Is there no one here to condemn you? Neither do I."* And then he added as a loving postscript: *"Don't do it again."*

Or think of Zacchaeus in that tree. Jesus didn't say to him, *"You crooked little extortioner, get down from there and start coughing up the money you've been swindling from your neighbors. Maybe then I'd be willing to be seen in public with you!"* No, he said, *"Zaccheus, today I would be honored to share dinner with you."*

That's how Jesus saw people. And it was with that same kind of grace that Ananias looked at Saul. Picture the scene. Ananias walked up to Saul, who sat there – blind, helpless, confused – his hands covered with Christian blood. Ananias stared at him in silence, thinking of all the things he might say (or might want to say). Then he laid his hands gently on the blind man. And the first words out of his mouth were perhaps the most disarmingly gracious thing that anyone could have said to him. *"Brother Saul..."*

He called Saul his **brother**! That was a name reserved for fellow Christians. How could he do that? How could Ananias treat as a brother in Christ someone who had imprisoned and killed his own brothers and sisters? It made no sense. But that's what Ananias called him. And the impact of this simple man's acceptance would last longer than a lifetime for Saul. That's grace.

3. But there's one more thing to be said about Ananias and his role in Saul's conversion. Not only can we see that man's great courage and his amazing grace. Ananias also gave Saul a gift of **vision**. Luke says that when Ananias touched him, *"something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again."* But it wasn't only Saul's physical sight that was restored. Ananias helped him to see for the first time with his heart.

Saul had been struck blind, and for all he knew it was permanent. You know, a shattering blow like that can be devastating. Someone dear to you dies suddenly – or the diagnosis comes back and confirms your worst fears – or there's an accident, and now you have to live with crippling disability – or you lose your job – or your family falls apart. Any of those things could turn you away from God in bitterness or disbelief. Any of them could leave you, like Saul, numb and blind and crippled (perhaps not physically, but spiritually crippled).

God doesn't want us to be spiritually crippled. He wants us to be whole on the inside. But for reasons that I don't pretend to understand, sometimes God will choose to heal us through the very experiences that have crippled us. I do know that when we're going through those hard times it's easy to lose objectivity. And it is in those times, when we get wrapped up in our own pain, that God will sometimes enlist someone like Ananias who not only accepts us and trusts us and loves us, crippled as we may be by guilt and anger and confusion and remorse.

They also have the gift of being able to help us see our way through the crisis. They give us their eyes – their vision.

Think about Saul and what we know of the man. Without Ananias to re-focus his vision, Saul could well have seen his accident on the road as God's punishment and nothing more. I cannot believe that seeing his misfortune as God's way of punishing him would have transformed Saul the Pharisee into Paul the Apostle. No, it is to Ananias's undying credit that he helped Saul to see that devastating encounter not as punishment, but as God's way of turning his life into something entirely new.

There are people around you who, to all appearances, may seem to oppose everything that Christians stand for. They might appear hard and insensitive, perhaps even ruthless and bitter. That didn't stop Jesus from dying for them. Do you know someone like that? Let's suppose you do. Let me ask you the same question that Lucy asked Susan: Do they know what Jesus did for them? Do they know the arrangement Jesus made to save them? If someone like you doesn't approach them with courage and grace and vision, they could spend the rest of their lives and beyond thinking they were, at best, little more than target-practice for a capricious and heartless God. And if you don't try to set them straight, to help them see the truth of how much Jesus loves them, who will?

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