

## LIFE-CHANGING POWER

Dear Christian friends,

I wanted to start out by thanking you for having me here today. It was a long trip from the Middle East in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, but I made it! My name is Ananias. I want to tell you about a day that I will never forget, a day where I got to see God's power at work first hand.

But before we do that, I want to read from a book that your pastor showed me. Where I come from we have the Old Testament and then we have to tell each other the things that we have seen. The disciples told of their time with Jesus and those stories get handed down! Peter tells of his run to the tomb of Jesus that by that time was empty. Five hundred disciples talk about seeing the Risen Lord and the news travels pretty fast. And that's what I'm doing today, I'm sharing the way that God worked on me and what he did for his church in my presence.

But I'm so glad that someone wrote it down. That means that even after I'm gone, others will hear, others can know. I never met Luke, but he was a helper of the man that I helped. His story is exactly as I remember it. I can tell you for sure that it is true. That's why I want to share his words with you today and then I'll tell you what I remember from that day.

*<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

*<sup>5</sup> "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.*

*"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. <sup>6</sup> "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."*

*<sup>7</sup> The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.*

*<sup>10</sup> In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"*

*"Yes, Lord," he answered.*

*<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."*

*<sup>13</sup> "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."*

*<sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. <sup>16</sup> I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."*

*<sup>17</sup> 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." <sup>18</sup> Immediately, something like scales fell*

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*from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup> and after taking some food, he regained his strength.* (NIV84)

I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe what was happening. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. It just didn't make sense. It was amazing enough that I, Ananias, of all people, was receiving a vision from the Lord. But what God was telling me to do, what he was telling me he had done, it was more than my brain could comprehend.

What was of such great importance up here in Damascus that God felt he needed to speak to me directly? Oh, just the minor matter of Saul coming to town. You know, the guy who stood there giving approval to the stoning of Stephen. The guy who threw men and women in prison for following the Way. The guy who persecuted Christians unto their death. The guy who was determined to do everything in his power to oppose the name of Jesus. That scary dude? Yeah, he's here.

But I wasn't receiving this vision because the LORD was trying to warn me. His words weren't, "Hey, get out of town before he kills you, too!" Instead it was, "Why don't you go pay him a visit? Don't worry, I let him know you're coming." 'Seriously? This is what you want me to do? This is the man you want me to go meet with? Lord, I know that you know everything, but you seem to be forgetting why he's here. He hates you. He hates me. He's already harmed I don't know how many of your people and he's here to do more damage. I know you said he's praying. I know you said he's been blinded. But are you sure he isn't trying to pull a fast one on us?'

That's what I told myself in the moment, but deep down, my thoughts were a bit different. It wasn't just that I was scared. It wasn't just that I was nervous. But rather, it was because I didn't believe that Saul could really be changed.

In my mind he was a lost cause. He wasn't like one of those degenerate and immoral types who didn't want God to ruin all his fun. He was way worse. Someone who sinfully abuses everything without a care in the world might eventually hit rock-bottom and realize how lost they are. But Saul was the exact opposite. He was the pinnacle of morality...and he knew it. He was one of the best Bible students from the one of the best Bible schools. He zealously followed every one of God's laws down to the very finest of details. He took his God very seriously and had no doubt in what he believed. That's why he made it his mission to rid the world of Christians. In his mind they were blasphemers offending the holy name of the LORD. So he was sure that imprisoning and killing the disciples of Jesus was a mighty fine thing to do. It's one thing to rebel against God because you just don't care. But Saul was rebelling against God fully convinced that he was doing him a favor. How could you possibly change a man like that?

But if you were to delve even deeper into my heart you would have found an ever more dreadful thought. I didn't think that he deserved to be changed. Do you have any idea how much we feared him? Do you realize how much blood he had on his hands? He was killing our brothers and sisters! And from all that we heard, there was no remorse, no sadness in what he did. How could a man like that ever deserve the goodness of God? How could a man like that ever receive mercy from the LORD? Let him stay blind, in his sight and in his heart! Isn't that what his sins deserve?

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But then I heard what had happened. I heard what Jesus, my Lord, had done. No, he didn't attack his enemy with a lightning bolt or cause the earth to swallow him whole. Instead, he changed his enemy into a friend. He changed Saul from an adversary, into a brother. It wasn't the blinding light from heaven that did it. That just got his attention. It was Jesus' words that made an impact. "**Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?**" he asks. These attacks against Christians were the same as attacking Christ himself. But Saul didn't quite get it yet. So he was told plainly, "**I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.**" And all at once Saul came face to face with the resurrection.

For three days he was left in darkness to ponder and pray on what this meant. He had hated Jesus because he thought him to be a liar and a blasphemer. And so he despised everyone who dared to proclaim this Nazarene to be the Christ. But now this prophet who he thought was dead, was very much alive. Which meant that all the things his disciples were saying about him might actually be true. That he was something more than just a man. That he was something more than just a rabbi. That this Jesus really was and is God's Son. That he is no liar, but is the truth. He is no blasphemer, but is in fact the Christ of God. His resurrection from the grave could only mean one thing: Jesus of Nazareth is Messiah and Lord.

I can't imagine what it must have been like for Saul during those three days. It's no wonder that he didn't eat or drink. His world had been rocked to its core. He couldn't possibly know who he was anymore. And just think of the amount of guilt that weighed upon his conscience. How fervent his prayers must have been. How passionate his pleas must have sounded. How could he ever hope for the Lord to look upon him with favor ever again?

But hope came when God told him that I was being sent. Sure, it would be nice that he could see again. But there was something else he needed far more. He needed forgiveness. He needed grace. It wasn't easy for me to go, knowing what he had done to so many others. It wasn't easy laying my hands on him in kindness when he had used his hands for so much worse. But isn't this the kind of God that we have; one who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but desires that they turn to him and live? Isn't this what he's been doing since the Garden of Eden: forgiving his children's wickedness and remembering their sins no more? Isn't this the miracle that God so often works: calling out to the worst of sinners and changing them in ways that are beyond belief? Isn't this what he had also done for me?

So I went to the house of Judas on Straight Street to bring to Saul the gift of God. I called him brother, for that is what he was now. He was no longer the blasphemer and persecutor and violent man. Saul was **Changed by His Power**. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, his sins were removed from him as far as the east is from the west. This was his, the moment I placed my hands on him. It was given to him again as waters of Baptism washed over him. He was now a new creation, a child of God, a beloved brother of Jesus, yes, even, a saint. Because our Lord and Savior Jesus is just that powerful, and just that loving.

This is something that you, as followers of Christ must remember: the power of the resurrection to change. We too are **Changed by His Power**. Perhaps, like me, you have known people in your life that you have thought could never be converted. Maybe it was someone like Saul who is so confident in their own goodness that they don't think they need Jesus. Or maybe it was someone like the thief on the cross who turned so far from God's Law you can't imagine them ever turning back. Even though you

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know how powerful God is, that he is able to change hearts through his Word, still you look at some and think they are too lost to ever be found.

Or maybe it's not others that you think are incapable of change, but rather yourself. There are those certain sins you can't seem to get away from. That temptation that ends with you saying hurtful things; that pride that makes it so hard to admit you were wrong; that lust that entices you to look at things and think of things you should not; that greed that causes you to long more for the things of this world than the things of God. You know such things are an offense to God and you wish to rid them from your life. But you've failed, time and again. And so you wonder if these temptations can ever be conquered.

But do not ever forget, that what Christ did for Saul, he has also done for you. You have been **Changed By His Power**. He has changed you from enemy to friend. He has converted you from an adversary into a brother. He has spoken his Word and stated ever so plainly: 'I am Jesus. I am Jesus who lived a sinless life and then counted my perfection as your own. I am Jesus who took the punishment of hell on the cross to give you heaven. I am Jesus who shed his blood to cover your every sin of thought, word, and deed. I am Jesus who rose to life to give you life forever in heaven. I am Jesus who poured out the Holy Spirit into your heart through Baptism, and so I declare you to be a child of God, a new creation, yes, even, a saint. I am Jesus, and by the power of my resurrection I have changed you, both now, and forevermore.'

And use that Bible that you have! I don't have the whole thing – but you do! Use it! Remember what Paul would say later on. ***I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.*** God's Word is powerful – powerful to make changes in your hearts, in your minds, in your future! Use the power of God's Word.

Jesus changed you and now you can change yourself! You can live in a new way. Christ is there to help you fight against your old selfish heart. He is there to help you turn from temptation. He is there to guide you into all things good. He is there in the fullness of his grace to make you a new creation each and every day.

And if this miraculous change has come to us, then it can also come to others as well. If the power of the resurrection can melt Saul's heart of stone, then whose heart can't it melt? There is no one that is so far gone that Jesus cannot bring them back. There is no one who is so entrenched in their ways that Christ cannot change them. What made Saul so perfect as the Lord's chosen instrument was that he knew the depths of God's grace and the heights of his power. And that's what makes you excellent instruments as well. You have seen what he can do. You know that he can do it again. So there is no reason for us to ever hold back. There is no reason to ever think that change is impossible for anyone. There is only reason to rejoice! Only reason to celebrate his power and his love! Only reason to spend our days in thanksgiving for the change that he works! Only reason to rejoice, together with one another, with Saul, with all the saints on earth and those in heaven! Alleluia! We have been **Changed by His Power**. Amen.