

Views from the Pews - The courage and faith of Ananias

Following the Lord Jesus in the early days after his Ascension could be a terrifying experience. Jesus had been seen as the most recent and most serious challenge to long-established Temple authority. The Temple hierarchy had feared the consequences of the public uproars surrounding his public ministry, but assumed that whatever nascent challenges he might have stirred up during his lifetime had been quashed by his crucifixion.

All the disciples knew how the wrath of the traditional leaders of Judaism could be so easily kindled by any apparent renewal of Jesus' challenge to their interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Stephen was stoned to death for refusing to deny that Jesus was indeed the long-prophesied Christ, whose revolutionary teaching was now spreading out of control. Far from discouraging the growing dissent, Stephen's example only fuelled the tumult. Remaining patches of resistance were being rooted out by ardent defenders of the current form of Judaism as it had been developed over years of compromise with the Romans.

Saul of Tarsus is introduced to us as a powerful defender of the status quo, who stood by watching the stoning of Stephen, thoroughly approving of it. He 'ravaged the church... breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord' not only throughout the city but also anywhere he could find and arrest the people whom he regarded as betraying the sacred commands of the Law. Having stirred up a lot of trouble in Jerusalem, in due course he arranged to carry letters to the synagogues in Damascus, authorising his intention to arrest anyone belonging to the Way, and bring them bound to Jerusalem. On the road, the risen Christ met him in a vision, and Saul reacted as anyone would – blinded, terrified, cast down to the ground helpless in the face of the unimaginable power that he had presumed to challenge. Afterwards, his companions could only 'lead him by the hand and brought him into Damascus' (Acts 9: 8).

The Lord recruited Ananias to go to the house where Saul was hiding, and lay hands on him to restore his sight. Ananias knew of Saul's reputation, so, understandably, he tried to object. But the Lord reassured Ananias that Saul was to be 'a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles'. Fortunately for us, Ananias had the courage and faith to obey. The rest is history.

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