

# Can People Really Change?

Hespeler, May 1, 2022 © Scott McAndless

[Acts 9:1-20](#), Psalm 30, Revelation 5:11-14, John 21:1-19

I would like to begin by saying that I am very much on Ananias' side in our reading from the Book of Acts this morning. Ananias receives a vision in which Jesus himself appears to him with some very specific instructions: **"Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."**

It is a wonderful thing, of course, to be on the receiving end of such a vision, but Ananias hesitates. **"But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.'"** And I just want to pause here and affirm just how very wise Ananias is to hesitate here.

## Hesitation is Good

Ananias is completely right (and the Lord does not contradict him) that Saul has been an extremely violent, abusive and angry individual. His mistreatment of the followers of Christ has been so egregious that the reports of it have spread far and wide. He is feared in Damascus because of things he has done almost 300 kilometers away. The point that Ananias is making is that abusive and violent people don't just change and I feel that I need to underline the simple fact that he has a point. At the very least, we need to be very skeptical when they profess that they have.

## A Common Pattern

For example, anyone who has ever experienced domestic abuse (or has counselled people who have) would definitely be with Ananias at this point. There is a familiar pattern that emerges in many cases of domestic abuse. The abuser (often but certainly not always a man) has a tendency when frustrated, thwarted, intoxicated or otherwise affected to lash out with verbal or physical violence. The victim may tolerate a certain level of this abuse – not because they should, of course, but because it is just human to want to maintain an important and meaningful relationship.

But the abuser will eventually go too far – will do something that scandalizes even themselves or that threatens to expose them for who they are because of the visible damage that they have done. At this point, the abuser will often have an intensely powerful experience of repentance. They will express intense sorrow and regret. They will, above all, loudly proclaim that they have changed, that they have learned their lesson and they will never behave so abominably again. At this point the victim may well forgive them because, as I say, people often feel that they have to maintain the relationship at all costs.

## A Honeymoon and the Disappointment

What then follows is a period of time that might be called a honeymoon. Oh, the abuser becomes



extremely respectful and caring towards the victim. It is the best of times. But here is the problem, when that is the pattern, the honeymoon never lasts. Sooner or later, something triggers the abuser and the whole cycle begins all over again.

So, if you have ever experienced abuse or you love someone who has, you can certainly be forgiven for being dubious when abusers proclaim that this time is different, that this time they have changed. In fact, by the time most victims finally get to the place where they choose to save themselves and the other people they love by escaping, they have been through that cycle so many times that it's quite understandable that they then have a very hard time trusting anybody who says that change is even possible.

## Also in Race and Group Relations

And I would also note that this is something that we see, not only in personal relationships, but in relationships between groups. How many times have we seen incidents of racial violence against minority groups where the majority were so appalled that they made these incredible promises that everything was going to change, and how many times have those promises been broken?

This is something that seems particularly poignant in Canada in the wake of finding so many secret burial sites at residential schools. Do you remember the promises that were made in the wake of that scandal? Do you remember the pledges that have been made about nation-to-nation relations, on ratifying the terms of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, of getting potable water in Indigenous communities? How many times have we said that this time it is going to be different? Every time we do that then don't really follow through, it just becomes harder for anyone to believe it.

## And Yet Change is Possible

So, yes, Ananias raises a very important issue in the midst of his vision of the Lord Jesus. But, as much as I appreciate him raising it, I do not want to fall into complete cynicism. Yes, people who have been abused or endangered by others are understandably reluctant to believe that people can really change. And yet, it is important to say that it is not impossible. People do change.

Saul, who came to be known as the Apostle Paul, certainly did change. He changed radically. And if we are not going to give up belief in humanity altogether, we need to believe that he is not the only one in the history of the world to do so. So how do we know when change is really possible? And how can we tell when an abusive person is just starting the old cycle of abuse all over again? Maybe that is the question that Ananias is really asking.

## A Focus on Intense Experience

When people try to convince us that they have really changed, what do they tell us? They usually try to persuade us by speaking about the intensity of their regret or sorrow. They talk about how deeply it affected them when they realized what they had done was wrong. Can't you just see an abusive domestic partner beating their breast and proclaiming their depth of feelings? Or remember how deeply we all felt our regret about the discovered residential school remains? Why we flew our flags at half mast for months so badly did we feel it!

But are such powerful experiences and expressions of deep emotion truly a sign that great change is coming? Well, certainly the experience that Saul had on the road to Damascus was powerful and

emotional. It was powerful enough to knock Saul off of his horse, affecting enough to strike him blind. But there is a strange thing that I noticed.

## How the Lord Convinces Ananias

When, in the midst of his vision, Ananias asks for something that will convince him that Saul could have changed, the Lord does not refer to any of that. The Lord does not say, “Don’t worry, Ananias, of course Saul has changed completely because I totally blew him away with my special effects budget.” Nor does he say, “You’ve got to understand that Saul feels really, really sorry for everything he did in the past.” Those are the kinds of things that serial abusers appeal to in order to prove they’ve changed and, as I said, it doesn’t actually inspire that confidence that we think it does.

So, what assurance does Ananias actually receive? **“But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’”** So what is it that God thinks should convince Ananias that Saul really has changed? Not his powerful experience, not how sorry he feels, only one thing – the fact that God has given Saul a job to do.

## A Sense of Purpose

You see, when God truly wants to bring about change in somebody’s life, that is how God works. What God does is offer people a sense of purpose; God gives them a job to do. This is very clearly signaled in the Book of Acts, particularly in this key story of Saul. Now, if you read very carefully the story of Saul’s experience on the road to Damascus that we read this morning, you do not actually get a strong sense that Jesus is giving him some task to do. The emphasis in the exchange between Jesus and Saul is only on the matter of Saul persecuting Jesus because of the ways in which he has been persecuting the church.

There is little more than a rather vague sense that there is a task being given when Jesus says to the blinded Saul lying on the ground, **“But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”** Jesus instead tells Ananias what he wants Saul to do, that he has been specially chosen to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

## The Three Conversion Stories

The interesting thing is that this is something that becomes increasingly clear to Saul as he goes forward. The story of his experience on the road to Damascus is actually told three times in the Book of Acts. And each time, there are significant differences between the stories. Since the entire book was written by the same person, this cannot be something that just happened by accident. The author seems to be trying to reflect Saul’s (or as he eventually comes to call him Paul’s) growing understanding of what had happened to him. At first, yes, it might have all been about the powerful experience. But, by the third time Paul tells the story, he apparently remembers that Jesus said a little bit more than just, **“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.”**

The third time the story is told, Paul recalls that Jesus went on to say, **“But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may**

**turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”**

## Saul's Increasing Understanding of his Calling

This is told this way in order to indicate Paul's growing understanding of what it was that truly changed his life. Yes, the light that he had seen had been so bright, I mean literally blindingly bright. Yes, the experience that he had had of the presence of the risen Jesus had been so very real and it had remained with him ever since. But, the more he thought about it over time, the more he realized that these were not the things that changed him. Maybe they had gotten his attention, but it was something else that had actually changed the course of his life. It was the simple fact that he realized that there was something he could do – something his Lord was calling him to do and that he alone could do – that drove the actual change of his life.

## Understanding for People who have been Hurt

Can a person change? The answer to that question is yes. And yet, I completely understand those who have experienced abuse at the hands of others and how they can be skeptical when they hear claims that any abuser has changed. I would especially counsel anyone who has experienced abuse to be very cautious when their partner comes along claiming that they have changed because of some powerful experience, realization or feeling of sorrow.

You are not necessarily required to trust someone just because they say such things. Trust is a very difficult thing. It can take years to build up and then can be broken in just a moment. Once broken, the task of rebuilding it becomes even harder and will likely take longer.

## How to pursue Genuine Change

And yet change is possible. If you are looking to bring about significant change in your life or in your relationship, I would suggest that you should look beyond powerful experiences or even powerful feelings of regret. Real change will come when you embrace a new sense of purpose in your life and when you come to understand how God is calling you to create new possibilities and new beginnings for the world.

When things have gone wrong in relationships, whether in personal relationships or in larger relationships like that between a nation like Canada and its indigenous peoples, it is far too easy for us to focus on what the other person needs to do, how they need to forgive or how they need to get over it and trust us again.

That is not where real change will be found. But when we can get past expressions of regret and sorrow and take on a single-minded purpose towards changing the situation for everyone, we will find that God is able to bring about change both in us and through us.