

UNRAVELLED

SEEKING GOD WHEN OUR PLANS FALL APART

What happens when our world falls apart? How do we press onward when our tightly-knit plans unravel into loose ends? What do we become when our identity—or the path we’re on—comes undone? What if all this is not the end we fear it will be?

In our unraveling, sometimes life surprises us with unexpected joy, love, and hope—with a new beginning we couldn’t have imagined. Sometimes we need god to unravel us, for we long to be changed. Throughout this summer we will explore biblical stories of unraveled shame, identity, fear, grief, dreams, and expectations. These are stories where God meets us in the spiraling, unraveling of our plans—and us—into something new.

July 21, 2019 (NRSV) – Acts 9:1-20

The Conversion of Saul to Paul: Discovering a New Path

9 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵ He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹ The Lord said to him, “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, ¹² and he has seen in a vision^[a] a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” ¹³ But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have

heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” ¹⁵ 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; ¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” ¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul^[b] and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

Footnotes:

- a. Acts 9:12 Other ancient authorities lack *in a vision*
- b. Acts 9:17 Gk *him*

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

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Theme Connections – In a flash in the middle of the road, God unravels Saul’s identity as a persecutor of Christ-followers and invites him to blindly stumble onto a new path. His conversion requires Ananias, a disciple vulnerable to Paul’s threats, to place his hands on Saul’s eyes so that he might see the world anew as Paul the Apostle. This new path for Paul later leads him to endure prison, persecution, travel, and trial. However, it also comes with new life, community, belonging, and hope. Sometimes God calls us into uncharted territory, and maybe our unraveling is simply a holy, fresh start.

From the Artist – Lisle Gwynn Garrity reflects on her drawing, “Restored: The Conversion of Saul”:



Saul doesn't just persecute Jesus' followers, he breathes threats and murder. His hatred fumes out of him like fire, perhaps a fire tended by fear—fear that his Jewish tradition will become impure or distorted, fear that the walls he's built around who's in and out will crumble, fear that his own hard-earned piety will diminish. He's a force of terror, sculpted by self-sufficiency and self-righteousness. He's a religious extremist not so unlike the ones we know today.

Until God smacks him down, pulling his sight and self-reliance out from under him like a rug. God softens Saul's steely heart by forcing him to confront those whom he harms, and by making him utterly dependent on relationship and others to survive. Perhaps Saul's conversion is ultimately a radical healing—God soothes his fear and hatred with empathy and intimacy.

But this isn't just a story about Saul's transformation. His companions on the road to Damascus are changed too, as they hear the voice of the risen Christ and escort a stumbling Saul to the city. Ananias' conversion is the most courageous of them all. He risks everything, including his own life to come close to the one with the power to have him stoned. Only in the moments when Ananias' fingers touch Saul's eyes, does Saul see, for the first time, the image of the divine in one who is not his enemy, but his brother.

In this image, a halo hovers around the hand of Ananias, nodding to the sacred courage required to melt the hatred of his oppressor with intimacy and connection. Scales pour out of Saul's eyes, purging him, cleansing him, igniting him with a new and particular mission: to pour out God's grace wherever humans try to limit it.

Guiding Questions

- What has unraveled and/or is unraveling in this story? For Saul? For Ananias?
- Our first introductions to Saul come in Acts 7:58 and Acts 8:2-3. Why do you imagine Saul is motivated to persecute the early Christians? How does he participate in these acts of persecution and murder?
- Saul is transformed from an enemy to a brother, a persecutor to a “chosen instrument” called particularly to welcome Gentiles into the fold. In this story, what events and elements fulfill his conversion?
- Few people have experienced a radical transformation such as Saul's conversion to Paul. However, many of us may relate to Ananias' conversion experience. Where do you see the grace of God softening enemies with closeness and connection?
- Throughout your life, what identities, beliefs, or practices have you shed? How has unraveling from former patterns and identities helped you to grow or become more whole?
- Imagine that you are Ananias. If God came to you in a vision and asked you to offer grace and belonging to someone you perceive as an enemy or threat, who would that person be and how would you respond?

Prayer

O God, unravel my assumptions and animosities so that I might become a vessel of your radical grace. Amen.