

AN UNSUNG HERO

Acts 9:10-19, 22:12.

A hero is a person who is regarded as a model of noble qualities, or one who takes an admirable part in any remarkable action or event. The word "unsung" means not celebrated in song or verse. So an unsung hero is one who is regarded as a model of noble qualities but is not celebrated in song.

We have good authority for the statement that all great history is at bottom the history of great men. The giants do the gigantic tasks, but has anyone ever measured what the giants owe to their smaller brethren? Can anyone say what Wesley owed to the humble Moravian, whose name was Peter Bohler? or what Martin Luther owed to a quiet scholar named Melancthon? or what Spurgeon owed to the faithful layman who conducted the service during which he was saved? And as for Paul, while we all know some things about his wonderful works, and stand amazed at his colossal labors, it is impossible for us to tell what he owed to his unknown friends who never had any place on the historic page, nor any hosanna from a crowd. In the course of his career he recognized and acknowledged his debt to Greek and barbarian, to bond and free, to high and lowly people. And most assuredly he knew and admitted his debt to Ananias, who did so much for him.

Who was this Ananias? Ask history about him. The historians crowd upon their pages the names of famous men who cast some glamor upon their time, but they do not have a single word about this man's work, nor a hint of his name. Well then, ask Scripture about him. But all that Scripture knows about him could be put into a paragraph. He was mentioned by Luke in his historic records, and by Paul in his speeches, but he does not have any prominence on their pages. And, in fact, he was not cut out for the center of the canvas nor for the glare of the limelight. His chief service to his generation was that which he rendered to Paul, the newest convert to the Christian faith, and the giant who was in need of a brother. He has become famous for that world among those who are close students of the scriptures.

There was a task which needed to be done. Someone was needed to do it. The Master looked for someone and He found Ananias. He was the right man in the right place at the right time; and God used him. The outcome was incalculable blessing.

Ananias is a most inspiring pattern of Christian godliness, not so much for public religious workers as for the generality of disciples, who, like himself, are called to live the Christian life amid the ordinary circumstances of workaday life. How many there are who long to live at their very best for Christ, but feel that their circumstances keep them hidden away in an obscurity which prevents their being used for Him!

The ordinary life is often the most difficult. It has the fewest outward stimulants, and therefore requires a deeper and steadier faith within the heart. We need Christians who will live the ordinary life in a really out-of-the-ordinary way. Our Lord has a special pleasure in those of His servants who are "faithful over a few things." We should beware of misappreciating or undervaluing the so-called commonplace. It is the aggregate of commonplace things which constitutes the greatest of all influences in the social life and unfolding history of mankind.

To all those Christians who feel that there is a disappointing sense of ordinariness about their life and surroundings, this man, Ananias is a silver starlight of encouragement. He is mentioned only twice in the New Testament, in the ninth and the twenty-second chapters of Acts; and even in these two places he is only introduced in a rather incidental way. Yet he amply shows us how the glory of the upper world may be brought to flash upon the dismal details of "the common round and the daily task." Look, then, at this man, and see in him a sparkling gem of Christian discipleship.

I. His Characteristics.

1. He was a disciple.

"Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias." He was a Christian layman without any special gift of public speech. He was neither an apostle nor a great preacher; nor does he appear to have been a leader or an official or even an outstanding personality. Likely we should never have heard anything about him had it not been for the part which he played in Paul's life. But how heartening to know that God knew all about him! No depth of obscurity can hide us from His gracious gaze. "The Lord knoweth the way of the righteous." Ananias is like some unknown star which for a brief spell reveals itself to the eye of the telescope and then forever disappears again. He was just an ordinary, humble disciple, who evidently sought to glorify Jesus by a consecrated life amid the unexciting usualness of customary Damascus ways and doings.

2. He was a devout Christian.

We are told that he was a "devout man according to the law." We admire his devotion to principle. How we wish that all who profess to be Christians today were similarly principled in their domestic, social, business and recreational relationships. Our devotion to Christ and that which is highest should show itself everywhere in our lives.

3. He was highly respected.

Ananias had "a good report of all the Jews that dwelt there." He had a good name among the Jews. He was regular in his worship and well versed in the scriptures. He was discreet in his piety and witness. It is no small thing to have our characters praised by those who differ from us strongly. Such a reputation as Ananias had is not gained in a short time. He was thought well of by those with whom he lived and worked and transacted business, and that not for a week or two only, but month after month. Such men are grand sermons. How we need volumes of them! Such life sermons are incalculably more telling and convincing than mere lip advertisements. In an environment more drab than our own, this disciple of Jesus lived excellently. In one sense, he was a Mr. Nobody; but in the far higher sense, he was one of the aristocracy of heaven. Even though the Jews hated Christians, they could not help respecting Ananias. The world had then, as it still has, a respect for those who walk with God. Before we can be useful to our fellowmen we must merit their esteem.

II. His Commission.

Do not imagine that it was an easy thing for him to do when the Master said, "Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus." Ananias was a timid man and might easily have shrunk away in fear from such an ordeal. Saul was the most notorious oppressor and persecutor of the Christians in all Judea. He had come to Damascus, even at this very time, on a blood curdling excursion of anti-Christian persecution. How dare Ananias fling himself into the eager clutches of this infuriated ringleader of the Saviour's adversaries? Must the lamb walk into the very mouth of the lion? Without any delay Ananias obeyed. He was willing to go just when and where the Master directed, and to count on his Lord's faithfulness in seeing him through. We would do well to learn from him the lesson of yielding exact obedience to our Master.

In the obedience of Ananias there shines a beautiful triple fidelity; that of Christian love, Christian loyalty, and Christian humility. His Christian love is seen in his attitude towards Saul. He went in to the arch-persecutor with the eloquently affectionate greeting, "Brother Saul!" Moreover, "he put his hands on him," which was a very gracious act because Saul had come to lay the hand of violence on Ananias, but Ananias laid the gentle hand of brotherliness on Saul. There is not a trace of resentment in the entire demeanor of Ananias. While his Christian love was revealed in his attitude towards Saul, his loyalty is seen in his attitude towards his Lord. He would not let his expression of brotherliness toward Saul cause him to shrink from affirming the Lordship of Jesus, even though that was the very thing against which Saul had been fighting so madly. Note also this good man's humility. He did not obtrude himself into his message. The very opposite was the case. His only reference to himself was the only one that was needful, "The Lord, even Jesus hath sent me." He did not start explaining who or what he was. He was content to be the faithful messenger of his Master. This was the man God used; ready, willing and faithful, yet just an ordinary, humble, obscure working man. He took Paul a word of brotherhood, of human cheer, an assurance of the kindness and the goodwill of the Master, and of the high calling of his life. He opened his eyes. He baptized him. He brothered him. He gave him sight and heart and hope.

Think of this, perhaps no other man will ever be as great as Paul, but any man can be as brotherly as Ananias. Most of our names will never appear on a scroll or be listed among the heroes, but we can be of such service to them that we can earn a part of their honors. Few can be giants, but all can help the giants. The trouble is that so many want to be Pauls and so few to be Ananias'. Be yourself, though you cannot be a giant, and do your own duty, though you cannot do theirs.

Christian friend, never complain that your circumstances render a robust Christian life and witness impossible. In the large majority of cases, circumstances are only imaginary prison bars. When our hearts are genuinely yielded to Christ, we hear a soul-thrilling voice through the dull bars that have apparently confined us, "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it." Instead of seeing a difficulty in every opportunity, we then see an opportunity in every difficulty. Instead of seeing thorns with every rose, we see a rose with every thorn.

We are not just toying with words when we say that there is a real sense in which Christian believers need never be "under the circumstances." The indwelling Saviour can give us a liberating independence of exterior environment. Nor need we live "in the limelight" to do true service for our heavenly Master. It is not only the front line of organ pipes that give forth music. Some of those out of sight are just as musical and sometimes are more important. A rose need not be seen before its fragrance can be appreciated. The longer I live, the more do I perceive the power and value of those lives which, although they never find mention in newspaper columns, transmit the love and life and grace of Christ among neighbors and workmates and friends in the ordinary walks of life.

No, publicity is not an essential either to faithfulness or to true success. Service in secret had "house top" results, even though the connection may not always be detected. We may feel out of sight, but we are never out of God's sight. He is watching to see whether, Ananias-like, we are faithful in our present circumstances. He may have much wider fields of service for us in the future; but the determining factor is fidelity in the present. Live for Christ at your very best, just where you are, and a day at a time. By how we live, by what we do, by words we speak, by looks and tones, by our actions and reactions, by discreet witness for Christ, we may make a contribution to the eternal well-being of souls every hour that we live.

Let Ananias, with his readiness for and faithfulness in service, be an example to us. Let his consistent godliness be an incitement to us to live in a similar way. Let his readiness, willingness and faithfulness be both a pattern and an inspiration. Let the beautiful way in which Christ used this ordinary and obscure man give such solid comfort to us as shall cause each of us to resolve on fuller loyalty and truer service to our Master in the days which may still be ours on earth. Thus, the common round and the daily task will be transfigured.