

When our boys were little, they loved trains. So we took them on short rail train rides all over Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Virginia. Each one was restored from a real railroad line that no longer existed. And to create a nostalgic experience of what it was like to ride that real train in its heyday, reenactors would pose as ticket agents, engineers, and conductors. The reenactor jobs were real jobs. They just weren't the original real jobs - with the real labor the original real jobs entailed. The original real ticket agents, engineers, and conductors had hard jobs. And those who held those real hard jobs truly labored each day for their paychecks. For that reason, railroad jobs have always been listed as one of the hardest jobs in the world.

But the absolute hardest job in the world is being a follower of Christ. That is because the job description of a Christ-follower is impossible to fulfill, for it requires us to be a "CHRISTIAN." And according to what God reveals in scripture, a "Christian" is someone who THINKS like Christ. A "Christian" is someone who ACTS like Christ. And a "Christian" is someone who RESPONDS to others like Christ. Which is not something we fallen and sinful creatures can do. We will always fall short of thinking, acting, and responding to others like Jesus.

Fortunately God has not left us behind at the station by calling us to do something we can't do. In His death on the cross, Jesus bought us a ticket to ride. And through the ticket to ride Jesus bought for us on the cross, we are given what we need to perform the hardest job in the world. And not just 'perform' the job, but perform it with excellence. Perform it with passion. And perform it with joy. We see this in the passage from Acts. There we heard of a Christ-follower named Ananias who was seeking to think, act, and respond to others like Jesus, and how one day he was called to do those things in one of the hardest ways imaginable.

Luke tells us a man named Saul headed toward Ananias' home town of Damascus, "*breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.*" Which means he wasn't making a tourist visit. In fact, he was carrying "*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.*" These "letters" were arrest warrants, issued by the high priest in Jerusalem. And along with Saul there were others with him, presumably temple police who would help him arrest people and drag them back to Jerusalem for trial on heresy charges. Luke then shares how this effected Ananias. For Ananias (who along with the other Christ-followers in Damascus who were doing their best to think, act, and respond to others like Jesus) was called by God to do his job as a Christ-follower in one of hardest ways imaginable.

Luke tells us Jesus called him to "*go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.*" But that was the last thing Ananias wanted to do. He knew why Saul had come to Damascus. So he said to Jesus "*I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.*" Luke tells us Jesus responded with sympathy, and shared with Ananias the reason He wanted him to do such a hard job: "*This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.*" That must have caused Ananias to take a deep breath.

It also must have caused him to remember that he made a commitment to be a Christ-follower by thinking, acting, and responding like Jesus. And it also must have caused him to go do the hardest job in the world because Luke then says he “*went to the house [of Judas on Straight Street] and entered it,*” and as commanded by Jesus placed “*his hands on Saul, [and] 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.”*”

Vacation Bible School starts tomorrow night. This year’s program is called Rocky Railway, and its subtitle is “*Jesus Pulls Us Through.*” Each night, the children will learn a different way Jesus pulls us through the difficulties of life the way a locomotive pulls cargo down the tracks. But getting on that train as a Christ-follower, and staying on that train as a Christian over the long journey of life, is the hardest job in the world. That is because what Jesus wants to pull us through is everything that tempts us not to THINK like Him. What Jesus wants to pull us through is everything that tempts us not to ACT like Him. And what Jesus wants to pull us through is everything that tempts us not to RESPOND to others like Him.

To see how Jesus seeks to enable us to be pulled through the difficulties of life to do the hardest job in the world (which is living as a Christian by thinking, acting, and responding to others like Jesus), we need to turn to the Acts passage. For it tells us how Jesus pulls us through.

It tells of first of all, that Jesus seeks to pull us through by helping us THINK like Him.

We see this in the Acts passage when Jesus tells Ananias that Saul “*is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles.*” When Ananias heard that, he probably began to recall some of the things Jesus taught His disciples about how to help Him bring about God’s kingdom and God’s will “*on earth as in heaven.*” For instance, he probably recalled that Jesus said “*you are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.*” And that reminded him that thinking like Jesus meant realizing that we are called to be God’s redeeming presence in the world, even toward someone like Saul.

Ananias probably recalled that Jesus said we are to seek to be His saving presence even if it requires us to “*love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.*” And that reminded him that thinking like Jesus meant that even in the face of persecution we are called to “*be perfect . . . as our heavenly Father is perfect.*” For we never know what God will do through us when our mind is in perfect tune with His mind. And he probably recalled that Jesus said “*whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*” And that reminded him that thinking like Jesus meant having God’s will be the primary thing we set our minds on, for this is not only how God saves us, it is how He saves others through us.

Second, it tells us Jesus pulls us through by helping us ACT like Him. We see this in the Acts passage when Jesus not only tells Ananias “*this man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel,*” but also says “[*For*] *I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.*” When Ananias heard that, he probably began to recall some of

the things Jesus taught His disciples about the behaviors those who follow Him are to exhibit as they help Him bring about God's kingdom and will *"on earth as in heaven."* He probably recalled that Jesus said *"you are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden."* And that reminded him that acting like Jesus meant we are called to shine the light of God's love toward everyone, even someone like Saul. For it is only when those in darkness see the light of Jesus through us that the darkness of their hearts and minds are dispelled.

Ananias probably recalled that Jesus said we are to shine His light even when *"people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me."* And that reminded him that acting like Jesus meant we might suffer because when God's light illuminates the evil around us, that evil sometimes pushes back to silence us. And he probably recalled that Jesus not only said *"You are the light of the world,"* but also said people do not *"light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house."* And that reminded him that acting like Jesus by shining His light even when we are suffering for doing so has the potential to bring people into relationship with Christ that we never would have foreseen coming into the fold, and also then becoming willing to suffer. Which is why Jesus told Ananias that *"I will show [Saul] how much he must suffer for my name."*

Finally, it tells us Jesus pulls us through by helping us RESPOND to others like Him. We see this in the Acts passage when Jesus replied to Ananias making excuses for not going to Saul immediately when He told him to *"go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul."* For in that reply, Jesus told him a second time to *"GO!"*, this time almost shouting the command, and then underscoring the importance of going by explaining why it was important, saying *"[for] this man is my CHOSEN INSTRUMENT to proclaim my name to the Gentiles."*

When Ananias heard that, he probably began to recall some of the things Jesus taught His disciples about the way His followers needed to respond to others as they sought to help Him bring about His kingdom and will *"on earth as in heaven."* He probably recalled that Jesus said *"You have heard that it was said, 'eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person."* And that reminded him that responding to others like Jesus meant laying down his life and picking up his cross in all kinds of ways, including by going to Saul.

Ananias probably recalled that Jesus said *"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* And that reminded him that responding to others like Jesus meant being perfect not only in what WE seek to do but also in how we respond to what OTHER people seek to do. And he probably recalled that Jesus said *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."* And that reminded him that as a Christ-follower, we are not only called to think like Jesus when we are the one proactively initiating a thought, and intentionally act like Jesus when we are the one deciding to do something, but also respond to others like Jesus when what someone else does impacts us in some way - even when that someone is a problematic person like Saul, a man who had come to Damascus

*“breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples.”*

That is because when we make the commitment to live by the ways Jesus lived (which He calls us to do throughout the pages of the gospels), vowing - through grace by faith - to THINK like Jesus, ACT like Jesus, and RESPOND to others like Jesus, we can actually perform the hardest job in the world: we can live like a Christian. And that means that we will not just ‘perform’ the hardest job in the world, but perform it with excellence. Perform it with passion. And perform it with joy. For while living as a Christian is impossible in our fallen and sinful state, Jesus offers to pull us through the difficulties of life in such a way that we are able to be a Christ-follower, a Christian, and through us living that kind of life bring about His will *“on earth as in heaven”* as others see Him in us and want to walk with Him as well.