

God Transformation In Action – Part I

Last week was the incredible story of Saul being confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus. Now we read the rest of the story, that I believe has profound application for each of our lives. Much of my message is centered on Acts chapter 9's application for our lives. Please open your Bible to the Book of Acts, chapter 9, at verse 18, "Immediately something like scales fell from *Saul's* eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; ¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. ²⁰ And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.' ²¹ And all who heard him were amazed and said, 'Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?' ²² But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ."

We know Saul stayed in Damascus for an extended period of time, The disciples of Jesus in that city were discipling Saul. However, when Saul had been baptized and left Ananias' house, ²⁰ "Immediately he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues: 'He is the Son of God.'" This should be how we acted when we got saved us; immediately seeking someone to disciple us and proclaiming Jesus to all who would listen. But you might have said, "I am not well trained and I do not know the Bible very well yet, I cannot answer their questions, so I cannot proclaim Jesus - for people will reject me." Do you think they did not reject Saul, the

scripture passage tells us he was rejected, but that did not stop him. Not sharing the Gospel because you do not feel fully equipped is not the proper attitude.

Understand when you proclaim Jesus as the Son of God most people do not, at least from the outset, begin to discuss or argue doctrines of the Bible. You share your testimony, your experience of how Jesus and His Spirit have changed you and made you a new creation. **“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.**

The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17) Explain to people who the new you is in Christ. If the person is interested, there will be time to discuss the Bible and its teachings and there are those, like me, who are willing to help disciple you and those you proclaim Christ to. Luke tells us in verse 21 **“All who heard Saul were astounded and said, ‘Isn’t this the man in Jerusalem who was causing havoc for those who called on this name and came here for the purpose of taking them as prisoners to the chief priests?’”** Saul created quite a stir in Damascus both among the Gentiles and especially the Jews because as verse 22, continues, **“But Saul grew stronger and kept confounding the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.”** Saul would have proved Jesus is the Messiah or Christ in a number of ways; his testimony, he also knew the Old Testament scriptures and the verses that told of the Messiah and His coming and there were still many people who were witnesses to the cross and empty tomb. Continuing in verse 23 **“After many days had passed, the Jews conspired to kill him, ²⁴ but Saul learned of their plot. So they were watching the gates day and night intending to kill him, ²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and lowered him in a large basket through an opening in the wall.”** The Word of God does not tell us how Saul found out the Jews planned to kill him, but I can tell you this; God would not allow Saul to perish until his mission was completed and once his mission was completed God brought him home. Paul would later write, ²¹ **“For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² Now if I live on in the flesh, this means fruitful work for me; and I don’t**

know which one I should choose. ²³ I am torn between the two. I long to depart and be with Christ—which is far better—²⁴ but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.” (Philippians 1:21-24)

When Joyce and I were overseas, three times men were hired to kill me and they came but miraculously God saved me. This revealed several things to me. Two things that I took to heart were, first, I no longer fear death because I know my life is in the hands of the almighty God and He will take me home when my mission is complete. Second, I have a job to do – I am to teach the Word of God in order to equip people to live the Scriptures and proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior to the lost world. I am focused on the mission God has given me. How about you? What is God calling you to do with your life that will bring Him glory? There is nothing greater than to spend one’s life dedicated to Jesus. Believing in one’s heart changes a person’s purpose for living.

Great ideas and what one truly believes builds people to live with purpose and they can change the direction of nations through its people and thus change the future. What one believes can not only shape their life but the lives of others. I remember and if you are a student of history, you might remember this as well, in 1961 President Kennedy towards the end of his Inaugural Address, asked the people of the United States and world to come together to free all oppressed people, first he quoted Isaiah (58:6) “... to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free ...” then he followed this by saying, “My fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.” But Kennedy did not stop there, he continued saying, “My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.” This speech and its ideas began to reshape some people’s lives. It was not just a great call for the world to

change, it was a great concept because of the person who believed it made it real with his passion. My beloved, it is Jesus that loosens “...the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free ...” and **we should ask not what God can do for us but ask what we can do for God.**

God’s Word Transforms Lives

In the Christian faith God’s Word, its great doctrines are a powerful means of shaping lives. As Paul wrote to the believers in Rome, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:1-2) But even more effective than God’s Word alone is scripture and doctrine lived out by real people demonstrating the miraculous changes Christ can bring in people’s lives and thus to the world. This means that the Bible is first and foremost, but we can also learn from books about biblical doctrine. For the Bible to be effective, as designed by God, believers must give feet to the Word and take the Gospel to the world. Many of us have been encouraged by the stories of people who lived and died by biblical doctrine and influenced others for Christ. God loves using ordinary people to do extraordinary works making the truth more powerful in our lives and God’s power clearly seen by others.

The story may be old, like Saul who became Paul or Barnabas or Peter or contained in Christian biographies of more contemporary times, like Hudson Taylor or Jim Elliott. Here is a recent excerpt of a letter written to a pastor, “I have a maintenance business and I found that in the manual labor I perform, there is time that my mind is free to meditate on the Word of God. And I have found

myself enjoying ... the glories and beauties of God in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the process I have memorized 15 books of the New Testament, and I have found the scripture to be increasing sweet and real and precious as the Holy Spirit takes them and makes the things of Christ real to me.” *(From a letter written to John Piper)*

Now it is one thing to know biblical teachings and that we should treasure the Word of God in our hearts but it is another thing to get a letter from a man who so loves the Word of God that he has memorized 15 books of the New Testament. Frankly, if you are like me, I am rebuked by my small amount of memorized scripture compared to 15 books, but I am also encouraged and challenged. My thought is if he can do it, so can I - but will I? But one must not stop at just memorizing scripture, one must take the Word of God to the people in their lives and tell everyone how Jesus has changed them. Like a pebble dropped into the still water, our sharing the Gospel of Christ will ripple out into the world in ways we cannot image.

Discipleship Transforms Lives

Let me put forth a definition. What is a Christian mentor or discipler? Broadly speaking, a person is a Christian discipler as that person exerts Christian influence in Bible based Christian ways. Or to put it another way, to the degree that one shapes and influence others to live in obedience to God and then whose life moves towards being a living image of Christ, that would make one a Christian discipler. Does this mean you need to be like John Calvin or Martin Luther or Billy Graham? Not at all, it means you are to be obedient in sharing Christ with your family, neighbors, co-workers and the people that you meet as you travel through this life on your way to glory.

God has equipped everyone uniquely to mentor or disciple others and share the Gospel. I was raised in a family of false beliefs; Masonic Order and Mormonism, coming out of these false systems, the true God gave me a love for the pure and true Word of God. God prepared me to relate to Muslims when I worked overseas in ways others could not. Muslim and Mormon themes and thoughts follow the same line of lies by the evil one and since I understood this I was able to relate and share Christ. My experiences overseas and consulting with churches around the world and seeing everything from complete heresy to great Christian communities led me to Canyon Bible Church and desiring to model our church after the first century churches found in Scripture and expository preaching of the Word. I am still growing and learning and deepening my faith and gaining spiritual wisdom as I dedicate my life to serving Christ, His children and you, my brothers and sisters.

One of the problems of the American Church is it has adopted a business model for doing church. The local church often is structured with a Pastor/CEO and Board of Elders that serve as its business directors. But my beloved understand that Christ's Church is not a business, it is a spiritual community. I may be the visionary to help in leading Canyon Bible but Scripture always refers to a team of elders leading churches not just one man. The Head of our Church is Christ, not a human. Church leaders are under-shepherds of the Great Shepherd, Jesus. Therefore, we, here at Canyon Bible are attempting to follow the model we find in Scripture for Christ's Church. With everyone serving as God calls them means no needs go unmet. I appreciate God bringing us to this point in the Book of Acts at this time, focused on obedience and serving, for in a few weeks we will have our annual church meeting and make decisions for the future. I would ask, that you spend time in prayer between now and then seeking God's guidance as to how you

are to serve your family, church and others. Ask God for a clear vision of what He wants Canyon Bible to be.

In today's passage we observe disciplers and leaders emerging in the early church. As when the early church was birthed and all the way through its history to this day - **what the church needs is Spirit-filled, Bible-saturated, Christ-exalting, self-abasing, servant-leaders who persevere in this corrupt world to exert biblical influence to the glory of Jesus Christ.** This is not limited to just pastors or elders it includes all believers. Leaders disciple others to become leaders in their families, church, workplace and the world. The writer of Hebrews said it this way, ⁷“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (Hebrews 13:7-8) Ultimately, Jesus is the only one who “is the same yesterday and today and forever” and we are to imitate leaders as they imitate Christ. The church should never focus on the pastor instead of Christ for the pastor is but a reformed sinner. The Bible clearly teaches history is unfolding as God's plan for salvation is being brought to completion and we need to prepare for spiritual battle and prepare our children and our children's children for a future with God and not the evil self-destructing world. We are to be God's light in the world until the return of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ who said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12) Jesus teaches His Church and His people “... are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” (Matthew 5:14) Saul was determined to be Christ's light and he lit up the world by preaching the Word, discipling others in the Word and living out the Word.

Saul Demonstrates His Calling

Saul did not allow the Jews of Damascus or anything else to prevent him from the mission God had assigned to him. Together let us return to our Bibles and take up our passage again, Acts chapter 9, beginning at verse 23 “After many days had passed, *(Let me stop here and help understand from Paul’s writing in the Book of Galatians chapter 1 we know he spent 3 years in Damascus. Now returning to our passage at verse 23)* the Jews conspired to kill him,²⁴ but Saul learned of their plot. So they were watching the gates day and night intending to kill him,²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and lowered him in a large basket through an opening in the wall.²⁶ And when he had come to Jerusalem *(Saul traveled south to Jerusalem, a 200-mile journey)*, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.²⁸ So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.²⁹ And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. *(Hellenists were Greek speaking Jews and most likely influential businessmen, the trade language of business throughout the area was Greek and Saul preaching Jesus was bad for business. Returning to verse 29)* But they were seeking to kill him.³⁰ And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea *(Once more Saul sets out northwest and travels 78 miles)* and sent him off to Tarsus.” From Caesarea Saul headed north to Tarsus 900 miles. Saul traveled almost 1200 miles or more than 60 days of journey to continue his call to preach Christ to the Gentiles. I have to wonder, as in the letter of the maintenance worker who set his mind to memorize 15 books of the New Testament, how Saul, as he

walked and had time with the Lord; what he set his mind to and what the Lord impressed upon his mind.

We observe in this passage the Lord set into motion Paul's life as a pilgrim and missionary traveling the Mediterranean world preaching Christ, planting churches and mentoring men to lead. We, my beloved, who live on another continent that Paul did not know even existed, are benefactors of his work. Who will be the benefactors of your sharing the Gospel? Those that Jesus places in your life's path and come to know Jesus as their Lord and Savior – where will they travel and who will they share Christ with? Like a pebble dropped in the still water the ripples of what Paul did 2000 years ago are still moving. Will you dare stir the waters of the world for the glory of Jesus?

Take note that even though Saul was a Pharisee with much knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures he was discipled for 3 years in Damascus before the Jews wanted him dead. Three years of being discipled before he was ready to move beyond Damascus. So, why would we expect to know the depths of God's Word immediately? Saul did not, yet he witnessed and proclaimed to everyone who would listen and I am sure even to those who did not want to hear, Saul preached Jesus to them and thus the anger of the Jews who did not admit Jesus was the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah. This is a model for us – no matter how long we have been a Christian we should be discipled by others and we are to disciple others and all the while this is happening, we proclaim Christ. This pattern builds strong spiritual wisdom built upon the Word of God and the discipling of others, this process is what we refer to as sanctification.

At first, it seemed to me amazing that after openly proclaiming Christ for 3 years in Damascus when Saul arrives in Jerusalem, he is rejected, we continue to

read in verse 26, “When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.” Then I thought of my own experience; how many people, especially those I knew me prior to coming to faith in Christ hung onto who I was before Christ saved me. It took a number of years for people I knew as an unbeliever to accept the change Christ had made in my life was genuine. I do not know if you have ever experienced this? Those who have met you after your coming to Christ and those who knew you from before you came to Christ see you differently. Saul was known far and wide by reputation as the persecutor of the people of “the Way” of Christ reconciled to God. Jerusalem was cautious and not sure of Saul.

Barnabas and Saul Minister Together

Luke first introduces us to Barnabas in chapter 4, ³⁶ “Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.” So, Joseph became a believer in Jesus as his Lord and Savior and it appears he had a heart of compassion and obedience. He sells his land for the benefit of the church and the apostles rename him Barnabas for its meaning “son of encouragement”. Now we jump forward in time to verse 27 of chapter 9, where we read, “But Barnabas took *Saul* and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.” So, for Saul, Barnabas lived up to the meaning of his name, “son of encouragement”. Saul arrives in Jerusalem and places himself under the discipleship and care of Barnabas. It took time and the testimonies of both Barnabas and Saul for the believers in Jerusalem to accept Saul.

From Jerusalem Saul travels north to Tarsus and proclaims Christ among the Gentiles and begins discipling men and planting churches. Other dynamics with the spread of the Church that was also happening at this time was also the apostles and other men were being obedient to Christ and the Church was expanding in many directions. Let us skip forward to Acts chapter 11, reading at verse 19, “Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.²² The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.” The church in Jerusalem, which came to be led by James the half-brother of Jesus, wanted to make sure the work happening in Antioch was true to the Gospel, for remember in other books of scripture we know the evil one very quickly sent false prophets, teachers and even those claiming to be Christ into the church to destroy it from within. Returning to verse 23 of chapter 11, “When *Barnabas* came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose,²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.²⁵ So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul,²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called *Christians*.” Again, God brings Barnabas and Saul together to teach and disciple others and preparing men to lead the churches established in the Antioch area. Barnabas and Paul were leaders making men into leaders by their discipleship, vision casting and equipping. Disciples of Christ are called to disciple others.

Next week we will explore the marks of leaders and disciplers and how many can become leaders disciplers on a small to larger scale as God calls. I ask you to pray how God is calling you as His servant to Christ and the His people and to the lost. If you pray, He will answer but you will need to listen.

Let me close in prayer.