

“Transformed to Love Together”

Acts 7:59-8:1 & 9:3-20, 2 Corinthians 5:17-20, Romans 12:2, Philippians 4:8

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Transformation stories and shows are everywhere. Many people are fascinated and inspired by the array of extreme makeovers about rooms, physical fitness, houses, personal appearance, communities, businesses, families and lives.

God has been doing extreme spiritual transformations ever since the third chapter of Genesis when humanity rebelled against God bringing pain, discord, sin, and death into the world. In the same chapter, just a few verses later, God foreshadows the ultimate transformation of Jesus offering salvation to everyone. God is transforming everything, righting every wrong, transforming every soul and bringing complete and perfect love and beauty back into the world. The psalmist sings about God's delight in restoring souls.

God provided Saul with an extreme spiritual transformation into the Apostle Paul. Saul was a religious leader who was striving to live the law. Saul became obsessed with purity. Saul lacked love, so he judged others for their mistakes which led to fear which led to hate.

God transformed Stephen to love and proclaim the transformational power of God's love. Full of grace, Stephen did great wonders and signs. Some of the religious leaders were not pleased, so they seized him and brought him before the council. Stephen remained calm and with love and elegance explained the gospel to them. “Then they dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him; and the witness laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.” With a word or even just a raised hand, Saul could have stopped this brutal violence. Saul had tremendous influence. Saul tells them to viciously stone Stephen. Scripture explains, **Acts 7:59-8:1** “**While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."** Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “**Lord, do not hold this sin against them.**” When Stephen had said this, he died. And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began ...” Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.” This was horrible; Saul was responsible for setting off a movement of hatred and violence against Christians endorsing brutal murders. No Christian was safe from Saul. You could be in the privacy of your home, doors locked, having dinner with your children. Saul would break down the door and drag off not only the father but also the mother right in front of the children leaving them orphaned. Saul traveled to Damascus to imprison more Christians when **Acts 9:3-20** “**a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?”** “**Who are you, lord?**” Saul asked. And the voice replied, “**I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.**” The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice but saw no one! Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink. Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, “**Ananias!**” “**Yes, Lord!**” he replied. The Lord said, “**Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now. I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so he can see again.**” “**But Lord,**” exclaimed Ananias, “**I've heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! And he is authorized by the leading priests**

to arrest everyone who calls upon your name.” But the Lord said, “Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake.” So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Instantly something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. Afterward he ate some food and regained his strength. Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days. And immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is indeed the Son of God!””

Lost in Luke’s concise writing is the emotion, struggle, and inspiring love of Ananias. God is asking him to visit a murderer. Ananias is afraid for his life. He is suspicious that Saul is setting a trap for him. God, can you really change a man like Saul? God why would you use Saul to spread the gospel? God, are you really calling me to go to Saul or am I imaging the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Why me God? Since you can do anything God why do you need me to be involved in Saul’s transformation? Ananias thought about his friends who were imprisoned and murdered by Saul. Ananias prayed for the Holy Spirit to transform his fear into bold love. Since God raised Jesus from the dead, surely God can transform Saul. Through Ananias’ prayers, God transformed him enabling him to look past his fear and skepticism to look beyond the hate and persecutions of Saul and envision Saul made over as passionate Paul spreading the love, forgiveness, grace, and joy of the gospel everywhere.

Saul was transformed into Paul through an encounter with God and the prayerful support of Ananias. God transforms people to love in a variety of ways. Sometimes the transformation happens in an instant other times God transforms over a lifetime. God might transform us through a nice three-step plan other times through a variety of happenings with steps forward and back.

If you desire to be transformed by God, to love together, you might try some of the following insights from the life of the Apostle Paul.

We are all murderers like Saul. Confess your sin. Jesus said if we hate another we have committed murder in our heart. We are all fearful like Ananias. We want to love courageously but worry that we might get hurt in the process. We are sinning whenever we are reluctant to love all people God and all of creation.

Paul said, **2 Corinthians 5:17-20 NLT** “**Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to Godself through Christ. And God has given us this task of reconciling people to God. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Godself, no longer counting people’s sins against them. And God gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. So, we are Christ’s ambassadors; God is making God’s appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, “Come back to God!”**

Sometimes we kill the love within us by failing to let go of our thoughts. We are hurt by someone and we let thoughts of bitterness snowball. We make a mistake and we continue to beat our self up over the mistake. We get stuck in the past, or in dreams of the future, so we fail to live and love in the present. We awake in the morning and instead of praising God for life, praising God for a fresh day, praising God for wonderful things on our schedule, we let our to-do list, burdens, and tough aspects of the day overwhelm us. Every time a negative thought enters your mind, acknowledge it, identify the source, look in, under, around it for more negative thoughts, and acknowledge them as well. Give all these burdens to Jesus. I visualize sitting down with a smiling Jesus beside a warm fire by a spectacular mountain lake. I imagine my negative thoughts as weight in my backpack. I visualize handing each one to Jesus. Paul said, **Romans 12:2** “**Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way**

you think.” Philippians 4:8 “Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.”

Nelson Mandela said. “May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears.” Partner with God in your daily life by inviting God to transform you by the renewing of your mind.

Welcome Ananaises into your life--people that are praying for you, that will speak the truth in love. People who are able to point out your mistakes and how God’s grace is transforming them. People who listen to you, enabling you to discover what God is doing in your life, so you can embrace what God is doing in and through you. My Ananias is my spiritual director David Butler and a few colleagues.

Be an Ananias to others. Pray for them. Encourage them. Help them discover how God is transforming their life. It is a great joy for me to observe God transform someone in my midst as I listening to another, asking them questions and praying with them.

We are called to be the hosts and facilitators enabling others to trade in their old lives for new grace-filled, joyful, loving lives. We are ambassadors for Christ. Barry Newton said, “One of the fundamental characteristics of Christ’s makeover plan is for God’s people to forgive others in the same manner in which they have been forgiven. Just as grace has released them from their sin, God’s people are to graciously let go of any grievances they might hold against others.” Nelson Mandela said, “For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others...As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

We all perceive that we need the extreme makeover of God’s grace. We long to have God transform us. We are God’s masterpiece. We were created to give and receive love, revealing goodness for all to enjoy. Sadly, we keep breaking ourselves, breaking our relationships, breaking creation. This is why our disappointment can run so deep. We are frustrated in ourselves for not being the loving person God created us to be. We try to be a loving child, parent, friend, spouse, neighbor, laborer, and person; but, we fall short in some many ways leaving us disappointed. Since as individuals none of us are able to love God or neighbor perfectly, our churches, communities, and the entire world are all broken which without the transforming love of God will leave us in disappointment.

God’s amazing grace of the transformation of Saul into Paul reveals nothing is ever wasted by God. Every talent, goodness, and insight as well as every weakness, shortcoming and question; and, every experience we have whether secular or sacred, rough or smooth, bad or good, God uses in transforming us to love extravagantly. God doesn’t destroy the pieces of our lives rather God transforms them over into new possibilities. We shouldn’t hate ourselves for our faults or beat ourselves up over selfish choices and destructive decisions. God’s amazing grace is eager to transform every aspect of us. Eugene O’Neill said, “Humanity is born broken. We live by mending. The grace of God is glue.”

God used the education, background and zeal of Saul to transform him into Paul, a zealous missionary, spreading God’s good news everywhere. Saul could have languished in the past, fallen into depression, and never forgiven himself for his hate. Instead Saul accepted God’s amazing grace and became Paul. Saul was baptized and became Paul. After being nourished by fellow Christians, Paul went out in public boldly proclaiming grace, the power of God to transform everyone.

God’s amazing grace of transforming Ananias’ focus from the sins of Saul to future love of Paul enable him to prayerful nurture him. Ananias’ transformation reminds me of the transformation of an Amish community in 2006. The Amish attended the funeral and mourned the death of Charles Roberts, the person who killed five of their young girls. They were able to see past the violence, pointing fingers, blaming, fear, hatred, and agonizing grief and envision Easter resurrection for the girls they loved now in heaven and were able to see even Charles as a beloved child of God. They believed God is

transforming us to love together, that God will take their tragedy and transform it into something beautiful. Their faith was a makeover for them enabling them to respond with love and forgiveness. People at the funeral marveled at their grace, the way they reached out and loved Marie Roberts. Their response was another Easter testament of love conquering hate, forgiveness, overwhelming revenge, and gives witness of how joyful eternal life triumphs over earthly death.

Teresa of Avila said, “The important thing is not to think much but to love much and so do that which best stirs you to love. Love is not great delight but desire to please God in everything.” Nelson Mandela embraced God’s transforming love of himself. Nelson handed over his fear, bitterness, and desires for revenge to God and God transformed him to love courageously. It took years for love to transform the Mandela family, the prison guards, South Africa, and the enemies. It took years for love to transform the division into reconciliation and unity. Nelson said, “There is no passion to be found playing small – in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.”

We all need to be transformed to love together. Perhaps it’s letting God transform a frustrating broken relationship into a life-giving friendship. Perhaps it’s transforming sadness into joy, hate into love, prejudice into acceptance, greed into giving, fear into courage. Perhaps it’s letting God transform an addiction into a persistent gift to society. What do you want God to transform about you? How will you welcome God’s transformation?

Often God calls us to transform others by the insights we learned from our transformation. If God has transformed your work or education into passionate joy, then help another. If God has transformed your marriage into a vibrant union, then help another. If God has transformed your view of scarcity into seeing God’s abundance enabling you to be generous, then help another. How will you love to transform others?

We are God’s ambassadors called to proclaim that God is transforming every tear into joy. Pointing out how God’s grace is transforming the world. God is transforming us into a worldwide community that cares, nurtures and loves every person, a world of peace, freedom and justice for all, a world where everyone has food, shelter, health care and meaningful work, a world where all of creation rejoices in our nurturing stewardship.

The world will tell you to make excuses, point fingers, assign blame, become cynical, give up, change is hard, transformation is impossible. God transformed death into life. God is and will certainly transform you. God will transform others through your love. God will transform the world through our love together. God is transforming the entire cosmos into a glorious, perfect, harmonies, loving creation. Amen