

A Christian Is Not the Same Person that He/She Once Was

Acts 9:10-19

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The Apostle Paul likens the miraculous change in the life of a Christian to being a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Just as God created the first man, Adam, in the original creation, so likewise He creates a new spiritual creation, a new man in Christ. God supernaturally gives you spiritual life where it did not exist. He gives you spiritual light to understand that you are an underserving sinner in need of Jesus Christ, the only Savior for sin. God gives you faith to trust alone in Jesus alone for His forgiveness and righteousness; and He powerfully and irresistibly draws you to Himself with an everlasting love. The Holy Spirit continues the work of sanctifying you throughout your Christian life until you are conformed to the image of Jesus Christ at your death and completely (in body as well as in spirit) conformed to His image at the resurrection.

From beginning to end, this is the work of the Lord. In fact, the Apostle Paul gives no credit or glory to man for this new creation in Christ, for Paul declares “And all things are of God” (2 Corinthians 5:18). You and I can no more boast that we have brought about our spiritual creation than Adam and Eve could boast that they had created themselves in that first creation.

And, dear ones, because you are a new creation in Christ Jesus, there will be evident in your life a wondrous transfiguration from the old man to the new man (“old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new”). Since your conversion, you now have a new Lord, a new hungering and thirsting to commune with Him, a new power to live for Him, a new love to obey His commandments, a new hope of eternal life, a new purpose in life in which Jesus is your life (and not just a part of your life). Whereas before conversion, it was the world, the flesh, and the devil that controlled and ruled in your life; now it is the Lord Jesus that is enthroned as Savior and Lord.

A transformed life is evidence of God’s work of grace. Let us look at the means God used to transform Saul’s life: (1) Saul Was Transformed through Prayer (Acts 9:10-14); (2) Saul Was Transformed through Suffering (Acts 9:15-16); (3) Saul Was Transformed through the Filling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17-19).

I. Saul Was Transformed through Prayer (Acts 9:10-14).

A. Saul of Tarsus had deceived himself into believing that he was performing some great service for the Lord by persecuting believers in Jesus Christ.

1. His addiction in life had become one of crushing and destroying the gospel of the crucified and resurrected Christ and all who embraced and promoted it. It took the almighty power of the Holy Spirit to break Saul’s addiction and transform his life. Saul was a warrior for his religion with an unrivaled zeal. He was not satisfied with violently entering homes and dragging Christian parents away from their helpless children to be unjustly tried and put to death in Jerusalem alone; He needed a greater high than that, and so he pursued the same persecution in locations outside Jerusalem and Judea as well.

2. He sought and obtained a commission from the high priest to haul Christians back to Jerusalem from the capital city of Syria, Damascus. And as he approached near the city, in a moment, a bright light from heaven shown around him. He beheld the risen Christ and heard Him speak (Acts 9:4b). In that brief moment of time, the arch-persecutor of the Church of Jesus Christ became the arch-defender of the Church of Jesus Christ (Acts 9:6a). Jesus commanded Saul to go into Damascus and to wait for further instructions, which he did (Acts 9:8-9). What happened after that in revealing the miraculous change in Saul’s life will be evident

in what Luke records in his inspired narrative.

B. While Saul is fasting for three days, a certain disciple of Jesus Christ in Damascus (Ananias by name) receives a vision from the Lord in which he is told to go to the house where Saul of Tarsus was taken, for he is praying (Acts 9:11), and no doubt he has been praying for the three days he has also been fasting.

1. Who is Ananias?

a. We are not given any background information about Ananias, nor does he appear any more in the pages of Scripture. He serves a very important purpose in the plan of God, and yet his name only appears in Holy Writ this one time to welcome Saul as a brother in Christ, to heal Saul of his blindness, and to commission Saul with God's plan for his life, accompanied by the filling of the Spirit.

b. Ananias is a Jewish name, which likely means he was converted to Jesus Christ possibly through the earthly ministry of Christ, perhaps through the events on the Day of Pentecost, or by means of those Christians who were scattered from Jerusalem as a result of the persecution brought against believers at the time of Stephen by Saul.

c. It would appear that he was not a recent refugee himself in Damascus, for we later learn from Saul that Ananias was known and respected by the Jewish community in Damascus (Acts 22:12). Perhaps Ananias was the pastor of the Church in Damascus.

d. Ananias was not the most willing servant at first—there was some reluctance due to the fearful reputation of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:13-14). And yet this faithful servant perseveres in doing what is right, even when it is difficult, even when there is reluctance, even in the face of certain fears. Was Saul feigning to be a disciple, so that he could enter the group as a disciple of Christ and then spring his trap at the just the right time to haul them off to Jerusalem? But Ananias though reluctant, though fearful, submitted to the authority of Jesus Christ. Dear ones, courage is not the absence of fear, but is fearing and obeying the Lord more than he/she fears any man or any circumstance (like Gideon). What is there to be courageous about if you have no fear at all?

e. God uses here a seeming nobody in a moment of time for a very important task. Be faithful in little, and the Lord will make you faithful in much. Don't seek the limelight, simply seek to be faithful and ask the Lord to use you in the ways that will glorify Him the most. You will never know how many lives have been changed by your faithfulness to the gospel and to the doctrine of Jesus Christ.

2. What was the transformation in Saul's life that the Lord Jesus specifically mentions to Ananias? Ananias knew of Saul's cruel reputation of persecution against Christians in Jerusalem and his intention to arrest and take Christians in Damascus to be tried and likely murdered in Jerusalem, but the Lord Jesus assures Ananias that Saul is a new creation in Christ; "for, behold, he prayeth" (Acts 9:11). This was not some kind of nebulous, general, or sporadic praying, but a fervent, urgent praying in faith in Jesus Christ by which the Lord challenges Ananias to understand that Saul is no longer the same man.

a. Saul was praying to the Lord Jesus who had revealed Himself to Saul on the road to Damascus. Saul was no longer the master of his own life; he had been mastered by the Lord Jesus and he was calling out to Him in humble worship of the very one He had previously hated, despised, and persecuted. His addiction to persecution was broken! In response to Saul's fervent prayer, the Lord Jesus revealed to Saul that Ananias would soon be arriving to pray for his healing and to give Saul his commission for the rest of his life.

b. Dear ones, fervent, urgent prayer offered in humble trust to Jesus Christ to direct your life, to submit to His will even when it is impossible in your own strength, to serve rather than being served (beginning in your family), to take pride and fear to the cross of Christ, to love Jesus, to love His doctrine and worship, to love obedience to His commandment more than you love anyone or anything in this world, to break those powerful addictions that control you—that is the kind of praying that indicates you are not sitting on the throne of your life—the Lord Jesus is. When praying is focused on the Lord glorifying Himself

in this world, in your family, in His Church, and in your life—that is the kind of praying that indicates it is more important that the Lord God be glorified, His name be hallowed, His kingdom come, and His will be done in earth as it is in heaven. Prayer begins with God’s glory and His praise even before your needs. The evidence of a transformed heart is that praying characterizes your life and that the Christian life is not all about you, but is supremely all about the greatness, glory, and majesty of His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. It’s about the glory and power of God to break the power and addictions and to transform you by His Spirit to the image of Jesus Christ.

II. Saul Was Transformed through Suffering (Acts 9:15-16).

A. Here in the commission of Saul that Ananias was to give to him on behalf of Christ, the Lord makes clear that there is a holy and divine purpose for Saul’s life (“for he is a chosen vessel unto me” Acts 9:15).

1. Saul did not first love Jesus, but was first loved by Jesus (1 John 4:19). Saul did not first choose Jesus, but was first chosen in Christ Jesus before the world began (John 15:16; Ephesians 1:4-6). Saul was a chosen vessel, and so are all of you who trust alone in Jesus alone for your eternal salvation.

2. There was nothing in Saul that commended him to Jesus Christ (nor is there anything in you or me). It is all of grace from beginning to end (Titus 3:5-6).

B. It is what the Lord reveals about the suffering of Saul for the name and truth of the resurrected Christ that demonstrates that the old Saul is dead and the new Saul has come to life through the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:16).

1. I doubt there is another servant of Jesus Christ that owns a pedigree of suffering for the gospel, for the doctrine, and for the worship instituted by Jesus Christ like that of the Apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 11:23-33). He who had been the one who caused so much suffering and death upon believers in Jesus Christ is the one who is especially called by the Lord to suffer “great things” for the name of Jesus Christ. His commission was—to bear witness before Gentiles, kings, and Israel; and to suffer “great things” for Christ. If that does not prove there was a remarkable transformation in Saul nothing will, for who in his/her own strength wants to suffer “great things”? That’s what Paul was called to do, and it is what all Christians must be willing to do (Acts 14:22).

2. This is not a suffering for Saul’s foolishness, or for his rebellion in going his own way and disregarding the doctrine and commandments of the Lord, but this is a suffering for the name, cause, and revealed truth of Jesus Christ. This alone is “persecution” according to the Bible (Matthew 5:10-12). The old Saul would never have suffered persecution for the gospel or commandments of Jesus Christ, but the new Saul rejoiced in tribulation, knowing tribulation worketh patience (Romans 5:3) and persecution for the truth and righteousness of Jesus Christ identified him with Christ and the prophets of old.

3. Dear ones, how you bear up under the attacks of others (even by those within the Visible Church) reveals much about the Spirit’s transforming power that has been worked and is working in your life. Paul said about himself: “I die daily” (1 Corinthians 15:31). He meant that through all that he suffered for Christ, more and more of the old Saul was dying and more and more of the new Saul in Christ was living. Suffering for Christ is not only that which come from visible opponents who despise an Almighty, Sovereign God who works all things after the counsel of His own will (Ephesians 1:11) or any of those doctrines of Christ found in our Confession of Faith, but suffering for Christ may also come from the trials, heartaches, afflictions, hardships that we may face from the enemy of our soul who desires to sift us like wheat (as he did with Job).

4. Beloved, pray that God would search your heart and see if there be any wicked way in you in your suffering, but also know that your pain and heartache may also be suffering because you are walking in faithfulness to Christ, and Satan hates it. May the words of Saul (Paul) ring in your heart as you run

the race set before you: 2 Timothy 4:7-8. The more that compromise abounds, the more that backsliding from confessional standards of biblical doctrine and practice surrounds you, let that not cause you to desert your commission as a Christian, but rather let it renew your covenant with the Lord to run that race that is set before you, looking to Jesus the author and finisher of your faith. How do you endure suffering for Christ? Suffering reveals whether the old you is dying or thriving, and whether the new you in Christ is growing or wilting.

III. Saul Was Transformed through the Filling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17-19).

A. Ananias enters the house and places his hands upon Saul, and welcomes him into the family of God by calling him, "Brother Saul" (Acts 9:17) and then administering the outward sign of God's family (baptism) to Saul. The family of God includes even those with shameful pasts, but those with new lives in Jesus Christ. If Paul was welcomed into the family of God as the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15), none who trust alone in Jesus alone and in His righteousness alone will be excluded.

B. Ananias prays that Saul might be healed of his blindness, and something like scales fall from his eyes. The Lord temporarily blinded the physical eyes of Saul, so that he might see more clearly the spiritual truths about his own sin and need of Christ, that he might see the spiritual truth about the Lord Jesus Christ, His death, His resurrection, the prophecies concerning the Messiah that pointed to Christ, the testimonies of Stephen and the faithful witnesses he had persecuted and put to death. Sometimes it is when we are sorely afflicted that we most gloriously see the glories of the Lord. We are too busy to see what the Lord would have us to see of our need of Him and of His mighty power, and love, and mercy, and holiness at times, but God knows how to slow us down and to get our attention, as did Saul's blindness.

C. And Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit to fulfil his commission. He had to be emptied of self, in order to be filled with Christ. That which clearly indicated that Saul had been transformed by the resurrected Lord Jesus was that he was filled with the Holy Spirit (controlled by the Holy Spirit) and lived under the control of the Holy Spirit.

1. According to Saul's own testimony, his life before his conversion was all about him, his pedigree, his law-keeping and righteousness, his moving up in the ranks of those who were notable and powerful within the religion of the Pharisees (Philippians 3:4-6). Saul was out to make a name for himself within his religion. But when the Lord Jesus miraculously transformed Saul, he counted all of that in which he previously took such pride as manure (Philippians 3:7-10).

2. Dear ones, although God powerfully works an immediate transformation when He spiritually creates new life in one who was dead in his/her trespasses and sins; nevertheless, the ongoing work of transformation in the life of a Christian has just begin and continues by the power of the Holy Spirit (being filled and controlled by the Spirit). This is not automatic. Sanctification is neither effortless ease nor effort-filled activity apart from Christ. You both rest in the promise of Christ that you died with Christ and rose with Christ, but you also war against the flesh as if your very life depended upon it. Sanctification and ongoing transformation from the old you in Adam to the new you in Christ is watching and praying, is exercising yourself to godliness, is running the race that is set before you with perseverance, is putting on the armor of God in preparation for battle, and all of this with full admission that the flesh (your mere human efforts) profits nothing without the Spirit's blessing. Dear ones, true faith under the control of the Spirit is not lazy or inactive, but moves you to hate sin and to love righteousness, moves you to take every step necessary to overcome that besetting sin in your life, trusting that you are more than conquerors through Jesus Christ.

D. Dear ones, there is a wicked and pernicious doctrine in the world that has also come into the

church as well that has been promoted by AA (and all its derivatives): namely, you have an incurable disease—alcoholism, drug addiction, overeating, abuse, sex, porn, lying, panic, etc. I am here to tell you on the authority of God’s Word that this is a lie, that God transforms addicts and heals them of addiction through the power of the resurrected Christ. Saul’s addiction to persecuting the Church of Jesus Christ was broken. The power of Satan over the life of the demoniac (that had a legion of demons) proves that. The words of Saul to the Corinthians Christians do not make them dependent for the rest of their lives upon the lie that their sinful disease is incurable (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Where is the power of God and hope of Jesus Christ in such a false gospel? I don’t know if there is a worse addiction than the addiction of self-righteousness (which was true of Saul, which was true of the Pharisees), and yet all such addictions can be healed by the power of the Holy Spirit in transforming your life and mine.

E. And yet that work of transformation having begun at regeneration continues throughout your whole life. Transformation is not the same as sinless perfection. You will still sin and transgress God’s commandments in thought, word, and deed, but the truth that you are a new creation in Christ will certainly drive you to sorrow over your sin and to eye the mercy of God in Christ Jesus as you seek the forgiveness of your Heavenly Father. This is a Christian whose life has been created a new, and who is being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

F. This same Apostle Paul who was so transformed by the grace and power of God also makes it clear that the Christian who is made a new in Christ Jesus continues to war and battle against temptation and sin (Romans 7:21-23). **The conflict has not ended**; it has just begun in earnest as the new man strives by faith in Christ against the world, the flesh, and the devil. **The conflict has not ended**; but the outcome is assured (Romans 7:24-25). **The conflict has not ended**; but it shall end when we see Jesus face to face in that heavenly kingdom when all temptation and sin, all tears and sorrow, all pain and heartache will vanish forever and ever. The reason why we do not and cannot despair in our transformation process is because the victory through Jesus Christ has already been won (Philippians 1:6).

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