



TRANSFORMED

We were once watching the late news on TV one evening when a televised report was made of a meeting of religious leaders in South Africa who were called together by the government. The political-oriented religious leaders who came together represented some of the largest institutional churches of the country. These were the pastors, bishops, and leading pundits of churches from which the government wanted some opinions on matters that affected the people.

From where the reporter stationed his camera for some interviews, the focus of the camera was pointed down on the herd of competing religious leaders who scrambled for front role recognition. Once the camera was positioned, the TV news reporter then stepped into the hoard of shoulder-showing competitors in order to interview some chosen representative of the religious world for the nightly news.

This was certainly a curious sight to behold. These religious leaders were pushing and shoving one another in order to get to the reporter. It was as if all dignity was thrown aside in order that the lucky pastor or bishop could have the camera focused exclusively on him for a nationwide interview that

would be broadcast on the evening news.

It was indeed an incredible sight. The presumptuous and self-promotion of some of the more politically oriented religious leaders of South Africa was clearly revealed. These particular leaders, and the churches they led, had allowed a century of political struggle for the right to vote in a free and fair election, to influence their behavior as supposed leaders of the people of faith of the nation. Fortunately, there are presently a host of humble church leaders who simply stayed home in order not to be a part of such self-promotion. These dedicated religious leaders desired to continue on with their dedicated ministry to help the struggling souls of their communities.

A. Saul, the Pharisee:

If Saul of Tarsus were here today, and at such a meeting, he too would assume that as a “Pharisee of Pharisees,” he would have been entitled to be there in the midst of all those presumptuous religious leaders. That was the world in which he lived as a young Jewish leader. He had all the pomp and prestige of the religious establishment of the day behind him. He could even have ushered in his Jewish military police and orchestrated some order out of the chaos in order that he should be the televised religious leader who was interviewed for the “late night news of Jerusalem.”

The struggle that continually faces religious leaders is that they must reconcile their present religious prestige with the mandate of having the mind of Christ that the Holy Spirit explains in Philipians 2:5-8.

B. Paul, the servant:

After many years, Saul transformed into Paul. And then after a lifetime of ministry that was driven by the gospel of One who threw him off his horse on a Damascus road, Saul, now Paul, was ironically ushered out of a city in Asia for His faith

in Jesus. In the midst of a hysterically stirred mob, he was stoned for his faith that he had once persecuted in his youth in his promotion of Judaism (At 14:19).

Even later on his last trip to Jerusalem, he was again seized by religious fanatics who would have torn him asunder if it were not for a Roman commander who rescued him out of the hands of a mob of Jewish fanatics (At 21:31,32). All this upheaval reveals the true character of some religious leaders who have no concept of the transformational nature of the gospel. However, in view of the extreme transformation from Saul to Paul, the transformational power of the gospel is quite evident. This is truly something to behold! And, we would add, it is from this transformational power of the gospel that many religious leaders flee. The news media does not seek to interview transformed slaves who labor humbly in their neighborhoods.

In view of Paul's transformation from pompous religious fanatic to gospel-driven servant, we now know why God called into servanthood a man like Saul of Tarsus. He had all the pomp and prestige in the religious organization of Judaism (Gl 1:13,14). He was a Pharisee of Pharisees—a renowned religious leader and exalted above all those presumptuous opportunists who would compete with him in religious leadership for an interview on the nightly news (Ph 3:4-6). He even had a ticket to imprison those who would speak out against the predominant religious establishment of Judaism of the day (At 9:1,2). He thus had position, pomp, and certainly, pride that carried him from one city to another persecuting those who had signed up with the humiliated “criminal” who was executed outside Jerusalem about seven or eight years before.

Because Jesus knew that eventually there would be millions throughout history who would imitate the transformed life of the apostle Paul, He personally called him.

C. Repenting from Saul to Paul:

So what must one do to repent of being such an attention-seeking, lordship-craving religious leader as Saul? To what extent must such a person go in order to reveal in his own heart that he has truly repented of a life that was so obsessed with fanatical institutional religiosity? How can the presumptuous change into a repentant slave for Jesus?

A humble response to the gospel can be the only motivation to accomplish such a feat to radically transform one's presumptuous heart. It was certainly not easy for Saul to repent of his life-style of commanding a team of persecutors into the servant leader Paul who gave his life as a living sacrifice for the Jesus he had formerly persecuted (At 22:8).

With the goal of the incarnate Son of God clearly in mind, it takes time to make a lasting character transformation.

It was not an instantaneous life-style transformation from Saul to Paul. From the day Saul met the Lord on the Damascus road, to the time Barnabas went many years later from Antioch to Tarsus in order to fetch Paul for the mission of proclaiming the gospel, it was at least five years (See At 11:25,26). It took that much time, including three years in an Arabian desert, for Saul to dig out of his inner character his former misguided religiosity, and especially his lust for notoriety among religious people. He came from the extreme of religiosity in this matter because he had formerly assigned himself to be the "savior of Judaism." And today, we are not unaware of those who would step up to be some "savior of the church" (See Gl 1:13,14). Those who involve themselves in being such are forgetting that the church has only one Savior.

Transformed people understand that it is their mission to preach the soul-changing power of the transforming gospel.

D. Radical transformation:

In Paul's response to the gospel in Damascus, he knew that he had to radically change his heart, thinking and behavior in order to emulate in his life the gospel of the incarnate God who appeared to him in a vision on the Damascus road. So over time, Saul transformed. He transformed into the humble Paul we all know best. He transformed so much in his personal demeanor that the Holy Spirit allowed him to write the following declaration: "*Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God*" (Rm 12:2). The Holy Spirit went further to encourage us to look to Paul as an example of transformation: "*Be imitators of me,*" Paul humbly wrote, "*even as I also am of Christ*" (1 Co 11:1).

After his years of repentant transformation that included time in Damascus, three years in an Arabian desert, and then Tarsus of Cilicia, Paul was then worthy and ready to be the apostle to the Gentiles. He was worthy to be an example as to the extreme one would go in order to follow Jesus. And after all his soul transformation, Paul was ready to accomplish his Christ-given mission as an evangelist of the living King Jesus to the Gentiles, kings, and the household of Israel (At 9:15).

Paul was transformed even to the extent of willingly being humiliated with Jesus for the rest of his life; sometimes being stoned, other times being beaten with whips, and at other times just being mocked for believing that Jesus was the King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tm 6:15). Nevertheless, he continued on faithfully in his mission with the threat of death hanging over him as he struggled from one city to another in his ambition to both live and preach the gospel. He did all this in order to preach the good news of the crucified Galilean whom he had formerly considered a condemned re-

ligious criminal (See At 14:19; 2 Co 11:16-29; Gl 2:20).

The New Testament account of Paul's radical transformation has been an example for millions throughout the centuries that there is transformational power in the gospel.

E. To die for the Lord Jesus Christ:

Paul eventually transformed in living the mind of Christ. On one occasion, therefore, he essentially upbraided some disciples who were fearful of his possible murder in Jerusalem. He responded to their concerns, "*What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus*" (At 21:13). This is certainly the extent to which a true gospel response will take us in our thinking and living. It is as John wrote a promise of Jesus to the persecuted Christians of Smyrna: "*Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life*" (Rv 2:10).

Since it took the Lord Jesus unto death to accomplish His incarnational mission into this world, then it should be no surprise that it will take us, as Paul and John, unto death to accomplish our mission to preach the gospel of Jesus to all the world (Mk 16:15). In fact, Jesus would remind all of us of the following extent to which our transformed lives must go: "*Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me, cannot be My disciple*" (Lk 14:27).

Inherent in the preaching and teaching of the gospel to others is persecution, and possibly death (Mt 5:10-12).

From the pomp of notoriety in a religious system that encouraged such, to poverty and death in the shadow of a cross, Paul allowed the gospel to transform his most inner soul. Only because he was eventually transformed to be a servant of Jesus could he have been qualified to write the following remarkable statement. It is a statement that reflects on

his transformational repentance from a presumptuous persecuting Pharisee to a gospel-preaching servant of Jesus who would die for the gospel message he preached:

“I [Paul] say the truth in Christ, I do not lie, my conscience also bearing witness with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rm 9:1-3).

Totally transformed disciples encourage others to totally obey the gospel.

F. Guarded from self-presumption:

As leaders of God’s people, we must continue to pray as David: *“Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins. Do not let them have dominion over me”* (Ps 19:13; see Nm 15:30). We need to cease presuming to be somewhat in view of the One who emptied Himself from being God in the spirit in order to be Jesus in the flesh that was nailed on a cross (See Ph 2:5-8). The more we grow in our knowledge of the extent to which the Son of God went in His incarnation from God to us, the more we are overwhelmingly stirred to transform ourselves into being a humble servant of our reigning King. After completing an inspired document on the subject of the grace of God that was extended through the incarnate Son of God, was only logical that Paul would conclude with the following mandate:

Therefore, I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service (Rm 12:1).

Unless one truly understands the incarnation of the Son of God in the spirit into the Son of Man in the flesh, he or she will always weaken the power of the gospel to transform one’s personal life. We must never forget that only transformed lives can transition into eternal glory.

Group Review Discussion Questions

[After reading the text of this bookito, answer the following questions in a discussion group with others.]

1. Before he was called into the mission of preaching the gospel, to what religious sect of Judaism was Paul an active participant?
2. To what city was Saul going when Jesus appeared to him in a vision, and for what purpose was he going to the city?
3. What are the greatest character obstacles that face leaders as they seek to lead the church?
4. What were the key character differences between Saul the Pharisee and Paul the humble servant of the Lord Jesus Christ?
5. Why does it take time to transform one's character from lordship behavior to servanthood discipleship?
6. What is the character of the one who has the "mind of Christ"?
7. To what extent did Paul transform in character and thinking?
8. Why is the gospel the power that drives one to transform his or her life?
9. What is "presumptuous sin"?
10. What is the purpose for transforming our thinking and behavior into the mind of Christ?

ABBREVIATIONS

OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis - **Gn**, Exodus - **Ex**, Leviticus - **Lv**, Numbers - **Nm**, Deuteronomy - **Dt**, Joshua - **Ja**, Judges - **Jg**, Ruth - **Rt**, 1 Samuel - **1 Sm**, 2 Samuel - **2 Sm**, 1 Kings - **1 Kg**, 2 Kings - **2 Kg**, 1 Chronicles - **1 Ch**, 2 Chronicles - **2 Ch**, Ezra - **Er**, Nehemiah - **Ne**, Esther - **Et**, Job - **Jb**, Psalms - **Ps**, Proverbs - **Pv**, Ecclesiastes - **Ec**, Song of Solomon - **Ss**, Isaiah - **Is**, Jeremiah - **Jr**, Lamentations - **Lm**, Ezekiel - **Ez**, Daniel - **Dn**, Hosea - **Hs**, Joel - **Jl**, Amos - **Am**, Obadiah - **Ob**, Jonah - **Jh**, Micah - **Mc**, Nahum - **Nh**, Habakkuk - **Hk**, Zephaniah - **Zp**, Haggai - **Hg**, Zechariah - **Zc**, Malachi - **Ml**

NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew - **Mt**, Mark - **Mk**, Luke - **Lk**, John - **Jn**, Acts - **At**, Romans - **Rm**, 1 Corinthians - **1 Co**, 2 Corinthians - **2 Co**, Galatians - **Gl**, Ephesians - **Ep**, Philippians - **Ph**, Colossians - **Cl**, 1 Thessalonians - **1 Th**, 2 Thessalonians - **2 Th**, 1 Timothy - **1 Tm**, 2 Timothy - **2 Tm**, Titus - **Ti**, Philemon - **Pl**, Hebrews - **Hb**, James - **Js**, 1 Peter - **1 Pt**, 2 Peter - **2 Pt**, 1 John - **1 Jn**, 2 John - **2 Jn**, 3 John - **3 Jn**, Jude - **Jd**, Revelation - **Rv**

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