

“THE LORD’S MARVELOUS TRANSFORMATIONS”
Numbers 22:21-35, Luke 7:36-50, Acts 9:1-19
September 7 & 8, 2024

“The evangelist, Andrew, stared into the gun, wondering why the man didn’t fire. The assassin grew frustrated, then frightened, and finally he fled from the room.

“The phone rang, and Andrew found himself talking to the man who had come to kill him minutes earlier. “The Muslim leaders offered me a big reward to kill you,’ the would-be-assassin explained. ‘I rode across Bangladesh to come to your office. The reward was mine. I was ready to shoot, but I couldn’t move my arm. I couldn’t pull the trigger.’ The evangelist praised the Lord for protection.

“Andrew found it somewhat comical. ‘So what can I do for you now,’ he asked.

“Sir, I still can’t move my arm, and it’s because of you! Can you help me?’

“Right on the phone Andrew prayed, and instantly the man regained full use of his arm.

Astonished by the miracle, the man returned to the evangelist’s office and began to ask questions about this ‘Jesus’ of whom the Muslim leaders seemed to be afraid.

“The evangelist patiently explained the good news of Jesus’ love, even offering tea to the man who’d come to kill him. After forty-five minutes, the man prayed to receive Jesus into his own heart.

“The former hit man’s ministry **now** is to destroy the works of the devil. To this day, he is a fellow missionary in Bangladesh.”¹

God works in mysterious ways to reach out to people of this earth. God desires that every one of us come to know the great love of Jesus Christ, and to find eternal life through Him. He continues to reach out to the least, the last and the lost in order to provide them with opportunities to find Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Even those who would try to eliminate the faithful followers of Jesus are given opportunities to change their ways from enemies of God, to become friends of God.

The Old Testament account of Balaam is literally an eye opener (Numbers 22:31). The prophet,

¹ (The Voice of the Martyrs, *extreme devotion*, [Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2001] pg. 30)

Balaam, had been summoned to Moab by Balak, King of Moab, to curse the people of Israel as they made their way from Egypt to the land that God had promised them in Canaan. Balaam was faithful to the Lord's commands not to curse, but to bless the people of Israel, but on the second attempt by king Balak to convince Balaam to curse the Israelites, God gives Balaam permission to go to Balak.

However, God gets Balaam's attention through a strange means - the unusual actions of his donkey. Balaam was oblivious to the angel of the Lord standing ready to kill him if he went any further toward Moab. The "stubbornness of the donkey" saved his life three times, but got a beating from Balaam each time. But Balaam didn't know what had happened until God opened up his eyes to be able to see the angel standing with sword at the ready before him.

And once his eyes were opened, Balaam was able to understand what the Lord was calling him to do in the presence of king Balak. As a servant of God, Balaam was not to curse the Israelites, like Balak wanted him to do, but rather to bless them. Seven times Balaam blessed Israel and condemns the enemies of Israel. Four of those are direct blessings to Israel, and the other three are prophecies about any country opposing Israel being destroyed. Balaam's eyes being opened to the direction of the Lord saved his life and he became a blessing to the people of Israel as they went on toward the land of Canaan. Balaam was obedient to the Lord God Almighty.

Oh, but that God would also open up our own eyes so that we could see clearly all that He has for **us** to do - to bless and not curse; to build up and not tear down; to inspire and not discourage. God calls each one of us to become like Balaam and see as God sees, and do as God desires, so that we might support those whose faith is weak.

Jesus modeled this for us as He confronted the pride of one of the Pharisees. The man who invited Jesus to his home for supper did not approve of Jesus' anointment by a "sinful woman" (Luke 7:39). He thought Jesus was a bad man for not condemning this woman of ill repute.

But Jesus corrected his sight in order that he might see the woman as being as sinful as he was in God's eyes. Even one sin is enough to cause God's anger against us, as Adam and Eve found out

(Genesis 3:6-7). Just one disobedience to God's commands was enough to open their eyes to sin and to cast them out of God's perfect Garden of Eden. And one sin for us makes us fall from God's grace so that we deserve His punishment.

The Pharisee's eyes were opened to the fact that **we are all** in need of God's forgiveness. Yes, it is true that some of us are more sinful than others and need God's grace more abundantly than others, **BUT** all people are sinners and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). We all need forgiveness for the sins we have committed. Great or small, our sins grieve God and put us at a distance to His great love.

The sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet with her tears, and then wiped them with her hair, recognized her need for forgiveness and went to Jesus to find new life. Her eyes had been opened to her sin, AND to her Savior, and she sought out Jesus as the One who could redeem her. That act of humility and faith brought forgiveness to her sins, and enabled her to go on in her life in peace, transformed from one way of life in order to enjoy God's new life in her.

Many of us have become blinded by the sinfulness of our lives. We say words that hurt, even destroy, others. We do things that bring pain and grief, often without even knowing what it is we've done. We stand for things that are not in alignment with God's Word, trusting in our own wisdom, and we blindly live as if we have done nothing wrong. We stand before God with our fists balled up and our minds convinced that we are right, but we don't see that we are fighting against God.

That is the situation we find in our lesson today of the Book of Acts. Here in Chapter 9, we see a mighty transformation in the life of one who stood up against God, and believed he was doing God a favor by persecuting the new Christian Church. Listen to these words of Acts 9:1-19. (READ Acts 9:1-19).

Having been present at Stephen's murder by the Sanhedrin, Saul had given his approval to their actions. His mind had been made up that it was **right**, AND GOOD, to seek and destroy all those who were following the ways of Jesus. He had come to the conclusion that Jesus was not the Christ, that He

was a false prophet, and that those who left Judaism to go after Him needed to have their minds changed, and if not, then their lives terminated. He saw Jesus as a threat to the Jewish traditions, and therefore, as a Pharisee, himself, sought to end this “masquerade of truth.”

So blinded was Saul from God’s Truth, and from the fulfillment of God’s prophecies, that he full-heartedly, and fool-heartedly, moved out to bring an end to the followers of Jesus. He determined that he knew what was right, and he went for the authority of the high priest to give him permission to not only persecute those in Jerusalem, but also in Damascus. His plan was to search the population there, “*so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem*” (Acts 9:2). Sound familiar? It’s the same thing that the Muslims do against Christians today.

So Saul gathered up his team of thugs and began his crusade against the faithful followers of Jesus in Damascus. Only to be stopped COLD in his tracks by the very One he persecuted - JESUS.

Throughout history, some of the worst tragedies of humanity have been committed by ones who thought they were doing the very will of God. Satan had so blinded them that what they thought was obedience to God’s Word, actually was going up against God’s faithful ones. They were convinced that what they were doing was right in God’s eyes, at the demise and destruction of thousands, if not millions, of human lives. And sadly, the deception continues, and many are dying for their faith at the hands of self-righteous, blind, and angry individuals.

BUT GOD may not be done with them yet! God can intercede in the lives of anyone to open their eyes and turn them from their wickedness so that they might become agents of good, and not devices of evil.

Saul had his eyes opened to find that his actions were actually persecuting the very One he had been waiting for, the Messiah. And it was through Saul’s first hand encounter with Jesus that turned his life around and got him heading in the right direction. To be confronted with his actions by the Lord enabled Saul to fully see the Truth of God, and the fulfillment of all of His prophecies.

But Jesus wasn't done with Saul yet. Saul's passion and desire to serve the Lord were the very qualities that God needed in a servant. But while Saul's spiritual sight had been provided to him to see what God was doing for humanity through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, his physical sight was taken away temporarily to put the exclamation point to Jesus' calling in his life. It also provided a chance for another servant of God to prove his faith.

Having helped Saul into the city, his companions may have continued their purpose of finding Jesus' disciples within the city. However, there seems to have been a leak in the information about the group's intentions, for words spread quickly about what Saul had come for. And it appears that all the followers of Jesus go into hiding.

But Jesus calls one particular disciple, Ananias, to go to work for Him, to go to the very heart of the source of the persecution and heal him of his blindness. The vision Ananias receive was a conversation with Jesus, Himself, and Ananias is amazed at what he is being called to do.

I can imagine Ananias responding to Jesus call with the words, "Are you kidding me, Jesus! This man is a murderer, come here to take as many of Your followers away as he can find! You want ME to go and heal him?" (Waddell version of Acts 9:13-14.) He'd heard the news. He'd heard about what Saul had done in Jerusalem. Ananias may have had family who had been taken captives earlier. There was no way that he wanted to reveal his faith to the very one who had come to do away with Christianity! Like many servants of the Lord before him, Ananias put up a lot of questions and reasons why what Jesus was calling him to do was a bad idea.

It's human nature for us that when we are called to do the unexpected and the unusual, we argue with God about it. We ask God if He is really certain that what He's told us to do is actually for the good of the purpose. Doubt quickly comes into our minds as to God's ultimate power and authority, and we wonder what He is thinking by calling us to do the very opposite of what we might think should be done to bring resolution to a situation. We become blinded by our own wisdom and our own knowledge, and we forget that God is much greater than we are, that He knows much more than we do

in every situation, and that He is working in every situation to bring about His great purpose of Salvation for the world. So Ananias puts up a fuss about what Jesus wanted him to do.

But Jesus wasn't concerned about what Ananias thought about His invitation. His one word of command is emphatic and direct - "GO!!!" You see, in our limited minds, we are unable to see beyond the here and now. But Jesus knows yesterday, today and tomorrow. He knows all about each one of us, and He knows what gifts He has bestowed upon us to do His good work. And He knows the redirection that many of us need in our lives to actually begin doing His good work. All Jesus asks is our unwavering obedience to step out in faith for work for Him. And sometimes He has to get our attention first in order to get us moving in the right direction. It took blindness for Saul. It took a donkey turning away from his path for Balaam. It took the presence of the Savior for the woman who anointed Jesus' feet.

Sometimes it takes illness that lands us in bed for a while to open our eyes up. Sometimes it is a physical impairment that stops us for a while to get us to open our eyes. Sometimes it is the death of a loved one, or the loss of a job, or even an encounter with Jesus Himself that gives us clear sight from our spiritual blindness so that we can see clearly the will and purpose of God's plan for us. The question for each one of us is "What will it take for us to have our eyes opened to see the work that God has called us to do?"

For Ananias, it was Jesus' word, "GO!!!" **And then** came the explanation that quelled the fear of Ananias. "*This man is My chosen instrument to proclaim My Name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for My Name*" (Acts 9:15-16).

So having been successfully transformed from his fear, Ananias moved out in obedience to the Lord Jesus, He reached out to the enemy-destroyer and laid his hands on him, 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*" (9:17).

Brother Saul? Ananias was now claiming Saul as His brother in Christ Jesus! Saul's prayers

had been answered; the Lord Jesus has sent the man, Ananias; and he had laid hands upon him. Much like the Apostles had done to the folks in Samaria, the “laying on of hands” provided the transfer of power of the Holy Spirit from one person to another, enabling their life to become completely transformed in the process.

Saul had been changed in the process of three days in physical blindness. In his own vision, he has foreseen this exact scenario - Ananias laying hands upon him and he regains his sight. He had had time to consider all of the Scriptures he had learned as a student of the Pharisees with regard to the promised Messiah, to review in his mind the encounter he had with Jesus while on the road to Damascus, and to begin converting from an enemy of God to a servant of God and a follower of Jesus Christ. God used the physical blindness as therapy to cleanse Saul’s heart from all of the evil he had done. And his heart was strangely warmed, completely cleansed, and fully redeemed.

So when Ananias laid his hands on him as he had seen in his vision, Jesus removed the physical blindness from his eyes so that he could move on in his faith journey. *“Something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized...”* (9:18).

This was the confirmation of his full transformation from sinner to saint. Saul accepted Jesus as His Messiah, the Savior of the world, the Son of God, and allowed baptism to confirm his choice to receive Jesus into his heart. He was a new man, no longer a persecutor of the Church, but now a man focused upon proclaiming the Way, the Truth and the Life in Jesus, to not only his fellow Jews, but to the whole rest of the world.

Upon receiving baptism, Saul breaks his fast and takes food into his body, and regains his strength (9:19a). This was essential if he were to go and do the work that Jesus had called him to do. Saul would now be a servant of Jesus Christ, but would suffer many things as he shared Jesus with the peoples Jesus was directing him to go to. He would receive his own suffering as he lived as a servant of Jesus.

But there is no demonstration that Saul receives the Holy Spirit. Though Ananias had gone to

him by command of Jesus “*so that (he) may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit*” (9:17), there is no indication that he actually received the Holy Spirit at that time. Whenever others had received the Holy Spirit, they had broken out in speaking in tongues given by the Holy Spirit. But there is nothing here indicating that Saul responds with the speaking of tongues. Luke does not state that Saul received any gift of the Holy Spirit, even after his baptism. “*He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength*” (9:19a) we are told. But nothing as to the outpouring of any spiritual gift upon him at that time.

Now, please don't get me wrong here. I am not saying the Holy Spirit did not move into Saul's life. That is evident by the works he does later on after his conversion. But Jesus had called Saul to a new direction - away from being a persecutor of the followers of Jesus into a great ambassador of Jesus Christ. His life changed from that moment on. The Holy Spirit does not gift him with speaking in tongues of the Spirit, so his conversion and empowerment was given by different gifts. What is important for us is that Saul's life was transformed so that he was now moving in a new direction, completely 180 degrees in the opposite direction.

And if God can do that in Saul's life, He can certainly do it in ours, too. But what will it take for us to see and claim our own calling as a servant of the Lord Jesus? Temporary blindness? Instant and fleeting paralysis of an arm? The change of our own plans to enlighten us? Or the realization that Jesus has much more for us to do FOR HIM, rather than for ourselves? Let's pray...

Father, thank You for Your call in our lives to be Your servants. Though we may have gotten off to a rough and rocky start, open our eyes to Your calling and purpose in our life so that we, like Saul, may find our own lives transformed and renewed. Provide for us the gift of Your Holy Spirit to turn us around so that we may become workers for You, following Your commands, and taking the Good News of Jesus to all those around us, even though we may have to suffer for it as well. Empower us with Your Holy Spirit so that we might become bold in our own witness of our faith in Jesus Christ, so that He may be glorified in all that we do and say. This we pray in Jesus' great and powerful Name. AMEN.