

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We live in a society that seems to be enamored by the total transformation. If a total transformation is promised, we will watch shows or infomercials and buy products. And it doesn't matter what is being totally transformed, does it? Maybe it's a person's being totally transformed: their face through a complete makeover. Their body as they lose lots of weight. Maybe it's a house being totally remodeled. Currently, "Total Transformation" is the name of program for fixing your children's behavior. And people are buying it.

So let me ask you: where are you in need of a total transformation?

- Do you have a problem with anger management? [Attitude]
- Do you have trouble getting motivated or working hard? [Energy]
- Do you feel like you're spinning your wheels, not moving forward in your life or getting any closer to your goals? [Traction]
- Do you feel like there just aren't enough hours in the day? [Time]
- Do you struggle to make ends meet? [Financial]
- Do you feel like you're surrounded by people who seem to have it in for you... no one is considerate of you or your needs? [Attention]
- What faults or failures or mistakes have you made that cause you to question your character and integrity? [Character]

Let me ask it again, where are you in need of a total transformation? Most of you may be thinking of something by now. And most of you are not thinking of the most important area of your life where you truly need a transformation.

To help us discover that, I want to take a brief look with you at the life of a man who underwent a total transformation. And his name was Paul. His other name was Saul. You maybe know him as the greatest missionary that ever lived, planting dozens of churches across a wide geographical area. He was the writer of 2/3 of our New Testament. He was a fearless, tireless preacher of the Lord Jesus Christ. But he was only these things after his radical, total transformation.

Let me remind you of who he was before his total transformation. You need to know his background to know what he was really like. When we think the Jewish people at the time of Jesus, I think our minds automatically drift to Palestine and we assume that's where most of them lived. But the truth is for a variety of reason there were probably at least 6 times as many Jews living outside of Palestine as in Palestine. Paul was a Jewish man who grew up outside of Palestine. His home town was Tarsus of Cilicia. It was a large and influential city in the Roman empire located on the northeast side of the Mediterranean. It was a key military stronghold, it was a key trade route, and it was a key center for learning. It was known as the Athens of the East because of its cultural and educational features. That's where Paul was born and probably grew up as well. This influenced his thinking and his education. Paul was a cosmopolitan man. He was a well-educated man. And also of note is that because Paul's father was a Roman citizen, Paul also was a Roman citizen. This gave him special legal rights and protection. Something that would come in handy later after his total transformation.

But what we want to look at most is what Paul was like spiritually before his transformation. The pages of Scripture gives us lots of details. He describes himself in Philippians as "circumcised on the eighth day [meaning his parents got him off to a good start by fulfilling this Old Testament law exactly as prescribed by God], of the people of Israel [so he was of the chosen nation, the ones who

were picked by God to receive his Word and promise of the Savior], of the tribe of Benjamin [which was in the south part of Israel and many of them settled in Jerusalem, the religious capital of Israel], a Hebrew of Hebrews [he wasn't a Hellenistic Jew... one that was only Jew biologically, but Greek in all other aspects. In other words, Paul is saying that if heritage and background have any influence whatsoever with God... Paul had it all!];

“in regard to the law, a Pharisee” (Php 3:5). In Acts (23:6) Paul even says he was the son of Pharisees, so perhaps his father and grandfather had been Pharisees at all. That means starting at age 5 he would have begun his studies of Scripture. At age 10, he would have begun an intense study of the legal traditions. Then he formally studied as a Pharisee, which was the strictest sect of the Jewish religion. They kept themselves separate from anything that smacked of moral or ceremonial impurity. This formal study likely began in his early teens after his *bar mitzvah*. He was sent to Jerusalem to study under the greatest rabbi of the first century, Gamaliel. He tells the Galatians: “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers” (Ga 1: 14). “As for legalistic righteousness,” he tells the Philippians, righteousness that comes in connection with the law, he was “faultless” (Php 3:6).

In addition, by the way, Paul also learned a trade. Jewish tradition taught that a man could both think and do. So Paul was also taught to support himself through tent-making. The Bible indicates that he was good at his trade and could make a living at it.

So are you getting a picture of Paul before his transformation? He was a moral, upright man. He came from a solid family with a godly background. He was a hard worker. He was a scholar... very well educated. He was self-confident and self-assured. He enjoyed a great reputation and was well-respected. He read his Bible regularly and had big chunks of it memorized. He was in church every single weekend. So you see he was a guy in need of a total transformation!

Wait a minute. What was wrong with Paul? Don't we strive for all of those things? Wouldn't we feel like we had arrived in life if someone described us in the exact same way? What was the problem?

The problem with Paul was self-righteousness. What is righteousness? I've given this definition before. Righteousness is when you “have what God is looking for.” Paul believed that he himself without any help could have and be what God was looking for. Paul firmly believed that he was doing all that was necessary to impress God. He envisioned God looking down from heaven and saying, “Wow, look at Paul! Not bad! Not bad at all. Quite impressive. If only all my creatures were more like him, because he's so much better than most. If only all would work as hard as him... were as smart as him... were as generous as him... knew their Bibles as well as him. If only I could clone him, because Paul of Tarsus in Cilicia IS what I am looking for!” That's called being self-righteous. It's the attitude, “God loves me because of ... me.”

And because Paul was so impressed with himself, and was so convinced that he in himself was spiritual sufficient, he went down the worst, most ungodly path he could ever have gone down. He became persecutor of the followers of Christ. He felt that everyone needed to become as good as he was. But there was this new sect called followers of “the Way” who thought the Christ had come and that his goodness and his death were the key to being right with God. “What an offense!” Paul thought. And so he poured himself into stamping those who would follow a Savior named Jesus. **At the stoning of Stephen, “I stood there,” he recalls some twenty-five years later, “giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him” (Ac 22:20). I ... was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against**

them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them (Ac 26:9-11). Though he had the appearance of such a good man, Paul's self-righteousness put him in direct opposition to Almighty God.

Now here's where I want to challenge you. I started out today by asking you where you were in need of a total transformation. Did you stop and consider that the areas where you most need transformation are the areas where you think you are strongest and best? Listen. Be honest. Where are you guilty of self-righteousness like Paul? Where in your life do you think you are better than most? When do you often find yourself criticizing others?

- Do you criticize other people's looks or fitness level?
- The way others raise their kids?
- The way others clean their house?
- The amount of time others spend watching TV or playing video games?
- How lazy other people are?
- How rarely other people go to church?

Where you find yourself critical of others, looking down at others... whether you vocalize it or not... is likely an area where you are self-righteous. This is an area where you think that you already are what God is looking for. If when I asked for areas where you were in need of transformation, you thought of OTHERS... that is a huge warning sign! "Oh, I can tell you where my husband/wife needs a total transformation. I'll tell you exactly where my kids need it... parents... boss... mother-in-law." You have to stop that right now. You are the same as pre-transformation Paul. You are fighting against Almighty God and the salvation he wants to give you and you don't even know it! Your strengths are causing you to trust self instead of God and that will spiritually KILL you!

So let's look at what rescued Paul from the brink of spiritual death. What finally made him aware of his self-righteousness, it's total inadequateness, and the his need instead for Christ's righteousness?

Acts 9:1-19

9 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest **2** and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. **3** As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. **4** He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. **6** "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. **8** Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. **9** For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

[**10** In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered.

11 The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. **12** In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

13 “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

15 But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he 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.”] **18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.**

What did it take to totally transform Paul? It took a personal visit from the resurrected Lord Jesus. It took a 2 x 4 upside the head with the Son of God himself. He had to hear: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” In that moment Paul’s self-righteous world came collapsing down around him. What he thought as the greatest service to God – shutting down Christianity – was in fact fighting God. Jesus was, in fact, the Savior of the world. A Savior needed by Paul too. Because his attempts at righteousness -- at being what God was looking for -- were far short of the holiness and perfection God requires.

And yours are too. That area where you think you’ve got it figured out... you’re still not exactly what God is looking for. You fall short of the holiness and perfection he requires. Even in your strengths you are in dire need of forgiveness... and of course in your weaknesses too. If you are relying on self to be right with God, you are on a path away from God, not toward him. When Paul was finally able to see himself the way God saw him... as the chief of sinners... he could finally see Jesus for who he really is: The needed Savior, the essential sacrifice, the only one who can and does pay our complete sin-debt in full. And so he was baptized into the name of the One he had been persecuting, and dedicates the rest of his life to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is THAT Paul... post-transformation... that became the tireless missionary, the prolific author of inspired works of God, the incredible church planter, the bold preacher who was ready to die for the name of Jesus (and he eventually did.)

You need this same total transformation. Stop trusting self, glorifying self, magnifying self, drawing attention to self. See the risen Lord Jesus Christ. He saves you, rescues you, change you, redeems you, cleanses you, forgives you. In him, your life is totally transformed. But what about all those things you thought of first in your life that need total transformation? You thought your biggest need was a total transformation in Attitude / Energy / Traction / Time / Financial / Attention/ Character. Look at the life of Paul. Study the book of Acts this week. You’ll see he was indeed transformed in every one of those areas. But it all started with total turning from self to Christ. It all started by recognizing “I cannot. But Jesus has.” “I am faulty. Jesus is faultless.” “I am not loveable, but Jesus makes me lovely.” Friends, listen: Trusting in the risen Lord Jesus Christ and HIS righteousness, in HIM you truly do have what God is looking for. You are declared righteous, not guilty, in his site. Congratulations... You (like Paul) are being totally transformed: by God! Amen.