

The Spirit of Life Change
Acts 9:10 – 30

“In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

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. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

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

But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! 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.”

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.”

Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?”

Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him.

But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.

But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles.

He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him.

When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.”

Okay, to kick off this morning, do you have a favourite Christian true story (like the story of Paul)?

It could be one that you’ve heard. It could have been in the form of a movie. It be a biography or auto-biography?

If any come to mind, tell the person next to you.

One of my favourites I read many years ago was “God’s Smuggler” by Brother Andrew. It’s the story of how he risked his life smuggling Bibles into Communist Eastern Europe in the 1960’s.

During that time he has a car.

It was used a VB. He drove this car literally thousands of kilometre and all the travel took its toll on the poor vehicle.

So every morning he and a fellow missionary would pray together, “Lord, we don’t have either the time or the money for repairs on the car, so will You please keep it running?”

He continues, “One day we were dusting along a mountain road when up ahead we spotted a small truck coming towards us. As it pulled alongside, we also stopped.

“Hello,” said the driver. “I believe I know who you are. You’re the Dutch missionary going to preach in Terna tonight.

“That’s right.”

“And this is the Miracle Car?”

“The Miracle Car?”

“I mean the car you pray for each morning.”

I had to laugh. I mentioned the prayer in a previous meeting, and word had obviously gone ahead. “Yes,” I admitted, “this is the car.”

“Mind if I take a look at her? I’m a mechanic.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

I had put gasoline in that engine, and that was literally all since I had crossed the border. The mechanic went around to the rear and lifted the hood over the motor.

For a long time he stood there, just staring.

“Brother Andrew,” he said at last, “I have just become a believer. It’s mechanically impossible for this car to run. Look. The air filter. The carburettor. The sparks. No, I’m sorry, this car cannot run.”

“And yet it’s taken us thousands of miles.”

The mechanic only shook his head. “Brother,” he said, “would you permit me to clean your engine for you and give you a change of oil? It hurts me to see you abuse a miracle.”

Gratefully we followed the man to his village a few miles from Terna. We pulled behind him into a little courtyard filled with pigs and geese.

That night while we preached he took the engine apart, cleaned it piece by piece, changed the oil, and by the time we were ready to leave the next morning, presented us with a grinning new automobile.

God had answered our prayer.”¹

What drove Brother Andrew and many others is this:

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

You see sin – in all its various forms and faces – it does something to us. It warps us.

It perverts the good and the beautiful.

And it means our hearts are a factory of idols; we choose other gods as our God and give our hearts over to these gods.

So sin gets us in its grip, and then there are these other entities, these malignant spiritual entities that seek to torment and distress us.

¹ Brother Andrew, *God’s Smuggler* (Hodder & Stoughton: London, 1972), 120 – 121.

But God in His goodness and justice would not allow us to remain stuck nor could He could just overlook our sin.

So God the Father gave God the Son.

So Jesus came and he lives a good and ethical perfect life.

We're told that God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and power, and he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.²

And even though he had done no wrong and committed no evil Jesus laid down his life for rebels and died a terrible death of Roman cross for our sins. He paid the penalty and died our death that we could go free.

And in response if you lay down your life for him you become a follower of Jesus and Jesus does a work in your life.

You are brought into an unimpeded relationship with God.

You can receive pardon. You can receive forgiveness.

You are born anew. You are regenerated.

You receive a new status; you become a child of God.

You receive eternal life; a new quality of life now and new quality of life after you die.

There is something else that happens – what is it?

Tell the person next to you.

Transformation. Life-change.

In our reading this morning, Saul was a changed man.

He had reputation.

He used to be the guy that raised havoc wherever went in his persecution of believers.

He was the guy that when you him coming, you ran for the hills.

Three times we're told of how afraid others were when of Saul.

But then you find him powerfully preaching about the Name of Jesus.

He goes from someone passionately opposed to the gospel to someone who is zealous for the gospel.

He is altered. He

² Acts 10:38

He became a different person.

How does someone go from persecutor of the gospel to a gospel proclaimer?

“How does life change occur?”

Again, tell the person next to you.

If you feel comfortable tell them about your story.

There are broadly four modes or means by which life change occurs.

There is:

- *Counselling*

Good counselling does two things. One, it will give you insights into your behaviour, and two, it will give you tools to help in dealing with that behaviour.

Counselling is about making you more self-aware.

For example, say someone has an issue around anger. A counsellor will help you see some of the root causes. It could be what was modelled to you as you grew up; it be around feeling powerless, or even a sense of not being respected, or any number of causes. And it's like, you have these “Aha!” moments.

Or the issue porn-sex. A counsellor will say are ways and means to amend your behaviour and create new habits. And the issue may not be about sex at all.

There is:

- *Choosing*

In other words, “You can do it!”

“God said it. You better believe it. Now just do it!”

You've to make a decision.

You have to make choices.

It's about an attitude adjustment.

Choosing is about an appeal to the will – your stubborn will.

Another way is in

- *Community*

The quote I used some weeks ago:

“If you want to do something that is really hard, and you want to push yourself to the limits, if you want to be constantly tested in

love, if you want to live into your ultimate destiny – if you want to learn to be holy and blameless in love before God – there is no better place to do that than in the local church.”

You come face to face with the flaws of others.

You come face to face with yourself.

Not only that though, in community you experience welcome.

You have people cheering you on.

They have your back.

If you fall down they help you back up.

You have people praying with you.

You have people who speak truth and encouragement into your life.

I can say that when I first became a believer, I was so worried about what others thought about me. I was so scared of being rejected.

Being part of a community called the church I found acceptance.

I suddenly found, oh I can be myself.

It changed me.

Then one more:

- *Connecting*

Connecting with... the Holy Spirit.

You see when you become a follower of Jesus, you receive pardon, you are born anew, you are given a new status as a child of God, you receive eternal life.

But I need you to listen in:

When that happens something else happens, and it's this – another Life comes to live in your life.

This other life is the life of God's third self – God the Holy Spirit.

And for life change to happen in whatever issue you are facing, you need a pray-er.

And in whatever you are facing It will be replaced, overcome, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So this new life replaces the old with the new.

The Holy Spirit will release what's good and replace the bad.

So I would say most of us would be familiar with these.

Do we see these in the story of Saul?

Did he have community? Yes.

The believers cared for him, looked after him and protected him (twice actually).

Was there choosing? Yes.

He got up and he out preaching about Jesus the Son of God almost straight away.

Was there connection with the Holy Spirit via a pray-er? Yes.

Ananias prayed that he would filled with the Holy Spirit.

Was there counselling? Not in terms of what we think of today but he did spend with the disciples and apostles and they would have given him pointers and suggestion for this new life he had received.

So next question is this"

"Of the four – counselling, choosing, connecting and community – rank them in order of what is most popular, most recommended today?"

What do you think?

I would say, overwhelmingly, without a doubt, counselling is number 1.

If you have issue, if you are seeking life-change, then counselling is the way to go.

The demand for counselling today is huge.

So counselling is no.1... but after that?

60 years ago I would say it would have been choosing – you have to make choices.

More recently it has fallen on hard times.

And today you don't dare suggest that there are certain decisions that are in your hands to make.

I think from what I've observed younger people are discovering the power of community.

Connecting with Holy Spirit via a pray-er..?

So I wonder today if there has been an emphasis on one area at the expense of another when it comes to life change.
It will be different for different churches.

In our context, we are most likely to go to counselling route almost exclusively.

Now please hear me: I do not want to disparage counselling in any way.
I've had counselling. (You're probably thinking, that's not surprising – why did you stop??? 😊).
It absolutely has its place.

I want to suggest in our context, as I did last week (and will probably suggest again) that when it comes to life change, we may have neglected the dimension of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to change lives.

We have forgotten that the God is supernatural and through Jesus the Holy Spirit has the power to change us for the better.

I mean, it reminded just of a simple story of a couple where the wife was facing a minor but annoying health issue that was affecting them both. They were talking about this with a friend. They'd seen their GP, they wondered if it had psychological dimension so they'd seen a counsellor. Both good things to do. The friend said, why don't you get the Elders to anoint you with oil and pray for you?
You know, James 5 verse 14.
There was blank stares. It was like, it never entered their heads. It was like it was foreign to them.

Let us always be a church, a people, who make room for the power of the Holy Spirit.