

## You're Not Crazy to Believe That...Transformed Lives. Acts 26, 6/1/25

*"It's me, hi, I'm the problem, it's me."* That lyric from Taylor Swift's *Anti-Hero* became an anthem—not just for Swifties, but for anyone who's honest with themselves that the biggest issues we face aren't happening out there...They're happening in here.

In an honest moment, Taylor called this song a "guided tour" of the parts of herself she tends to hate and not want to face (bad decisions, impulsiveness, narcissism, treating people like objects), there is a despair that maybe she'll never change, even if on the outside she seems to have the charmed life of fortune and glory. Regardless of what you think of Taylor Swift and her music, what she's tapping into is the human experience in a sin-soaked world.

In honest moments have you come to this place? "It's me, I'm the problem, but change is impossible, I will always be this way. I'm always hitting the self-destruct button and wrecking relationships. I can't seem to stop that habit I'm ashamed of. My anger is tearing apart my marriage but I can't get a hold on it."

But friends, here's the good news- that uncomfortable realization, "It's me, I'm the problem", isn't the end of the story. With Jesus, it's only the beginning of transformation. In Christianity, only when we face the truth about our deepest spiritual problem, sin and our inability to fix ourselves, can we begin to grasp our deepest need for God's grace. When we realize we can't fix our deepest heart-problem by going inward using self-help or medication, or outward using good deeds or success, that's when we can finally look upward to God's provision in the Gospel of Jesus. When we reach out to him and say *"It's me, hi, I need a Savior."*

In our final message in our series "You're Not Crazy to Believe that" looking at compelling reasons for the Christian faith, today we want to see the compelling evidence of transformed lives. The promise of Christianity is not self-help but a new life. *2 Corinthians 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.* God is in the business of changing people eternally, permanently, and totally. And He does this through vital personal connectedness with Jesus.

This morning we will examine the most radically transformed life in the Biblical story from Acts 26, and then roll that forward 2000 years to consider our own lives. It's the story of the great evangelist of the 1st century Roman Empire, the Apostle Paul.

Now some context, Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem for preaching about Jesus in the temple courts. He was transferred to Caesarea, where he remained imprisoned for over two years under Roman governors Felix and then Festus. When Festus struggled to understand the religious charges against Paul, he invited Herod Agrippa II, who was familiar with Jewish customs, to hear Paul's case. In Acts 26, Paul is given a chance to speak for himself. He uses the opportunity not just to defend against the charges, but to share his personal testimony of how Jesus transformed his life.

**4** *"My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews.*

**5** *They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee.*

Before Paul was the Christian Evangelist Paul, he was the Jewish Pharisee Saul. And Saul wasn't just any Pharisee, he was trained under Gamaliel, one of the most revered Pharisees of Judaism. It was Saul's ambition to climb the religious ladder to the very top of the hierarchy of religious power.

**9** *"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth.*

**10** *And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them.*

**11** *And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.*

See, under the religious and moral veneer, Saul admitted he had a spiritual problem. Shouldn't someone seemingly so close to God be filled with love? Instead he was filled with rage, hatred, violence- and it was aimed at Christians. Saul was Nazi Heinrich Himmler of his day, attempting to exterminate Christianity all under the veneer of loyalty to God and country.

**12** *"In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests.*

**13** *At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me.*

**14** *And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'*

**15** *And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. **16** But rise and stand upon your feet,*

*for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you,*

**17** *delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you **18** to open their eyes,*

*so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'*

Wow. Talk about a come to Jesus moment! Amazing. Saul is proof that God's grace can reach even the most vile sinners. While God certainly doesn't come to all of us like he did Saul, this was a unique moment at a pivotal point in history where Jesus intervened, he isn't done with using miraculous encounters to bring people to Christ.

I was at the Y working out and struck up a conversation with a man who grew up in Hinduism in India, and in a season of great disillusionment with religion and deep meaninglessness in his life, he had a dream telling him to go out into the woods, and so he did, and he's in the woods and feeling silly for doing this, and he said, "I called out to the gods, I've already explored all the gods, they don't do anything for me, whoever you are, prove it." And at that very moment lightning out of nowhere went across the sky and shook the forest. And he said, "OK I'm listening, who are you, how do I find you?" And a voice said, "Go into the city and you will know what to do." He didn't know anything about Christianity, never met a Christian, and as soon as he went into the city, he saw a group of people in white and knew he was supposed to talk to them, they were Christians who told him the gospel and gave him a Bible, and radically changed his life.

But whether you have a traumatic, supernatural encounter or your encounter was through the consistent influence of people of faith, the church, reading the Bible and prayer, everyone who comes into a relationship with Jesus is given God's supernatural grace. Every encounter touches the miraculous! We have crossed over from death to life, as Paul says, from the power of Satan to the power of God! Next week we are baptizing 10 people who are evidence of this.

**19** *"Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those in Damascus,*

*then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.*

**21** *For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 22 To this day I have had the help that comes from God,*

*and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass:*

**23** *that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles."*

What a transformation! From Jesus hating, Christian persecuting Saul to Jesus loving, Gospel preaching Paul! Acts 9 tells us that it was so drastic that it was hard for Christians, even the disciples to really buy it. They were skeptical for a while until they his life was so radically

transformed, not just his message but his motives, his heart, his affections and behavior that they couldn't deny that it was the real thing.

The disciples wondered at first if this was a scam, but Festus thought maybe Paul's lost his mind, he's crazy to believe this! And Paul responded: **25** *"I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words."*

**26** *For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner."*

**27** *King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe."* **28** *And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?"*

**29** *And Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains."*

Paul's deepest heart desire was that everyone would have a vital relationship with Jesus that transforms their lives and their destinies. And these were not just words, Paul gave his life for the spreading of the gospel, being beheaded under the order of Emperor Nero in Rome 66AD.

Paul is just one story of countless Christians throughout church history who had their lives transformed by Christ. In Rodney Stark's book *The Rise of Christianity* he wrote about what made early Christians different in the culture around them. **1- Compassion in Action:** When the great epidemics hit the urban areas of the Greco-Roman world, everyone fled the cities, the Christians stayed and took care of the sick and the poor and old, sometimes to their own detriment. Why? Because the Gospel gives us a new passion for people and a courage that looks fear of death in the face, because we have life eternal! **2- Non-retaliation and Forgiveness.** The persecuted church did not respond with outrage and retaliation. Why? Because they experienced the deep spiritual forgiveness for their sin through Jesus and had peace with God that spilled out into mercy, grace, and forgiveness of others. **3- Class and Race Reconciliation**-The Church was the only place where ethnicity and class meant nothing, where the slave could be an elder or deacon and Jews and Gentiles who normally hated each other became brothers and sisters. Why? Because Jesus tore down the enmity, the gospel makes us all equals- we are all sinners and we all need Jesus' gracious gift. His love is so powerful that it can conquer even the deepest racism and hostility.

This is the normal Christian life, new creaturehood! It's not just reserved for those special few in the first couple centuries. Jesus is still in the business of transforming lives. Look around the room, get to know many of the people here and they will testify to this. If you are a Christ follower, maybe you've been walking with Jesus for years. Ask yourself, "Where would you be without Jesus? What would your life have looked like? Where would your marriage be? Attitudes?"

He's transformed my life. I remember a few years after I gave my life to Jesus meeting up with my old friends from high school for some event, and one of my friends after a couple hours

pulled me aside and said, “You know, when I heard you became a Christian, I laughed and thought it was either a phase or some scheme to pick up girls or make money.” But I can genuinely see that you’re different not just how you talk, but something deeper, inside.” And I said, “Anything you see, isn’t from me, it’s what God is doing in me. He has, and he continues to transform my life.

And this is what Jesus wants to do in your life. A relationship with Jesus transforms your past. When you type in google “How can I learn to...the number one thing people google is “love myself.” Humans are constantly burdened with trying to fill the God-shaped hole in their hearts with something else. What I would tell Taylor Swift is she doesn’t have to deal with self-hate, because at the cross Jesus wipes away our sins, paying our debt- saying “It is finished” it means we are fully accepted despite your dysfunctions, regrets, and the darkest corners of your heart you don’t want anyone to see. But he also transforms your present. He loves you enough not to leave you the way he found you. A real relationship with Christ will transform our lives, bearing fruit that comes from the inside out.

In a few moments we are going to partake in communion. Give you a moment to reflect. There are two kinds of people I want to speak to- those who say, “I am a Christian, but new creature? I’m not sure I have experienced this kind of change.” This is a process! But I’m too old for change! Never too old. But what you may need is a catalyst. A catalyst in chemistry is a substance that accelerates the chemical reaction or change faster, 10x, 100, 1000x faster. And for the Christian, that’s surrender to the Lordship of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. Full, 100% surrender of the areas of your life that we are resisting, trying to do it on our own, sin that you refuse to give up, a relationship you know you shouldn’t be in, or a calling to live your faith publicly instead of trying to hide it from others out of fear. You are gripping your own life, when Jesus wants to reign. And when we do, we unlock the power of the Holy Spirit to change not only our actions but our affections, what we love and what we want. Where do you need the catalyst of surrender? Porn habit, anger, lying, pride, a life that you are hiding from others, the power that money has over your life, screen addiction...

The second person here is the one who hasn’t entered a relationship with Jesus. Maybe you’ve entered self-help, or even entered spirituality, but not a relationship with Jesus. And maybe you’ve been with us for this series as a spectator, but you’ve sensed God pursuing you, drawing you in. Friend, I say with Paul, I “would to God” that you come to faith in Jesus and give him your life. This is the most important decision of your life. There’s only one Savior who has overcome the curse of death for us by dying under it, in our place, and then rising again. He promises real change from the inside out. And what you do with him determines not only life change, but whether death for you is permanent, or just a transition.

In the Rocky Mountains there is a famous dividing line--it’s marked by a big sign, the continental divide. All the water that falls to the East of that line flows downward toward the East, forming into streams and rivers that eventually empty out into the Atlantic Ocean. All the water on the West side of that line does the same thing headed toward the Pacific. That means two raindrops, falling side by side through the sky, only inches apart, land on different sides of that

line and end up oceans apart. That same thing happens here, right now. Seated side by side, inches apart, people who may end on different sides of eternity. One ends up in the unspeakable joys of heaven. The other ends up in an eternal place of spiritual death, separation from God and all his goodness and glory. Two people, side by side today, that end up eternities apart. For those in Christ, this world is as close to hell as you will ever come. For those outside of Christ, this world is as close to heaven as you'll ever come. And what you do with Jesus, makes the difference between those two. And so, this morning, I make no apologies about it: I want to give you a chance to respond to Jesus if you never have.

I want to invite you right now to receive what Christ has done for you. John 1:12. Salvation is a gift, and like any other gift, you have to receive it! The heart of Christianity is not a new approach to morality; a new reform to live better or get more religious. The heart of Christianity is saying It's me, hi, I'm the problem it's me, and then receiving the gift of salvation of what Jesus did Jesus DID.<sup>1</sup>

Give moment before communion for both.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to J.D. Greear for this illustration in an Easter sermon at Summit Church.