

Transformation Is Always Possible

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

6th in an eight-week series

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Acts 7:54–8:1 (NRSV)

⁵⁴ When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.

⁵⁵ But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” ⁵⁷ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸ Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died. **8** ¹ And Saul approved of their killing him.

Acts 9:1–6 (NRSV)

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵ He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

Acts 17:22–31 (NRSV)

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ ²⁹ Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Romans 12:1–2 (NRSV)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Transformation, seen in the life of one man.

The Spirit never rests. The conversions just keep coming as the creation of the Church¹ rolls on. The Ethiopian eunuch. The pivotal conversion of the Roman centurion,

¹When “Church” is capitalized it refers to the entire community of all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, including both those who live and those who have died. The book of Acts is the story of the Holy Spirit creating the Church.

Cornelius, along with his family and friends. Today, we come to the man most responsible for the development of the Church in its first few decades: the apostle Paul.

Paul's story can be confusing to those new to it simply because Luke refers to him by two names: Saul and Paul. In Acts, the apostle is referred to as Saul before his encounter with Christ and by Paul after his conversion. Saul, then Paul. Same fellow – just the Hebrew version of his name and the Greek version. Why the change by Luke? Because using “Paul” *after* the man comes to faith in Christ is a way of signifying that he will be the apostle to the Gentiles – to the Greco-Roman world.

Saul/Paul's conversion story is dramatic and not only because of his meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus. It is dramatic and powerful because Saul was a zealous and violent persecutor of Jesus' followers in the first years after Jesus' return to the Father. Luke tells us that Saul held the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen to death and that Saul was like a beast, tearing through the community of believers. Indeed, Saul was on the way to Damascus to round up believers when he was met by the risen Christ, who asked him, “Why do you persecute me?” In his letters, Paul would frankly admit his own guilt in waging war on the Christians. He understood better than anyone what the power of the Holy Spirit could accomplish in a person, even one like himself. After his meeting with Jesus, Paul spent the next fifteen years preparing for his mission and ministry – taking the Gospel to the Gentiles.

In the late 40's AD, Paul, accompanied by Barnabas, embarked on his first missionary journey. It took them from the south-central coast of Asia Minor northward into the interior as told in Acts 13-14. Paul and Barnabas founded churches in places such as Derbe and Lystra. It was a difficult ministry, as Paul met stiff opposition. In Lystra, for example, Paul was stoned so badly that his attackers assumed him to be dead.

In the early 50's AD, Paul undertook a second missionary journey (Acts 15-18). He began by revisiting Derbe and Lystra, where Paul was joined by Timothy who would play a central role in Paul's work. Paul then went north and west across to Macedonia, where he headed south, taking him to Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth.

In Athens

When Paul arrived in Athens, he soon headed for the council of the Aeropagus, a group of deep-thinking Athenians that had once held a fair bit of power. So far as the Athenians in general, Luke writes, “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17:21). Deep thinkers. Lots of them. Perhaps not too surprising given the rich heritage of Greek philosophy and culture. After all, this was the home of Plato and Aristotle and countless other philosophers.

The Athenians had their ideas about the nature of reality. What the world is. Who we are. The problem with the world. Even its solution. In other words, they had a worldview. Everyone does. And the Greeks embraced the idea that there is something larger than themselves, something unseen but quite real, whether it is Plato and Aristotle's first mover or the entertaining pantheon of Greek gods and goddesses.

When Paul rises to address these men, he talks to them in their language and quotes to them their own philosophers. He gets right to some of their deepest questions, such as the nature of being, so that he might talk to them about the God-Who-Is, the God who created all things, created humans in his image, and who provides everyone with being.²

²Then as now, a philosophical argument revolved around the nature of our being. We call ourselves “human beings,” but aren't we really always “becoming”? None of us are exactly the same from moment to moment. I'm told that I'm losing brain cells by the thousands every day! Heraclitus, one of the Greek philosophers, wisely noted that one can't step into the same river twice. The river too never stays the same.

Paul laid it all straight out for them: the truth is that there is a god, and not just any god, but only God, the LORD God. And as Paul told the Athenians, God made the world and everything in it. He is near. Indeed, we couldn't get away from him if we tried. Ignore him, yes. Escape, no.

But is it true?

How were his listeners that the claims he made were true? Because, Paul says, God resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. Simple . . . so simple. Christianity stands or falls on the truthfulness of Paul's claim.

For there is only one reason to be a Christian - because you believe that the Christian claims are true. Not because you need help with some aspect of your life or because you want to belong to something. Certainly, becoming a Christian will change the course of your life and help you cope with life's travails. Becoming a Christian will widen your circle of friends and make you part of a worldwide community. But those are consequences of belief, not reasons to believe. If, in the end, you believe that Jesus is largely a mythological figure or simply a very wise person who showed us a better way to live -- then don't bother. No one wants to build their lives on a myth and there is certainly no shortage of wise teachers and self-help books.

Transformation

Paul understood that transformation, such as his own, is to be the path of all those who come to Christ. In Romans 12:1-2, Paul transitions from Romans 1-11 to chapters 12-16. It is as if Paul has spent the first two-thirds of the letter climbing up the mountain and now, he begins down the other side, examining the Christian life in light of the work of Christ. In this, Paul does not concentrate on Jesus' teachings but on the implications of what Jesus has *accomplished*. And what Jesus has accomplished is so profound, so creation-altering that the only proper response is to offer ourselves, our entire beings, as a living sacrifice, for God has demonstrated that he is worthy of nothing less (v. 1). We can never stay as we once were. Our commitment to Christ demands nothing less than our transformation, the complete and utter renewing of our minds such that our *thoughts, feelings, and actions* are conformed to the ways of God. It is the marriage of what we believe about God with how we live with God, the joining of biblical theology and holy living.

How does this transformation happen? How do we "grow up in every way . . . into Christ" (Ephesians 4:15)? It seems, well, impossible so much of the time. There is so much in me that needs transforming. How can I put to death the old self (the living sacrifice) and put on the new self (the renewing of the mind)? Only by the grace of God, just as it was for Paul, who went from persecutor to apostle. This renewing of the mind is the work of God's Holy Spirit (see Romans 8:5-9), who works *with* us. If it were up to us alone we couldn't get there. Make a trip to Barnes and Noble and count the self-help books. Many of these are filled with excellent advice. The problem is that we just don't actually do much of it. No, only by grace can we ever hope to live a holy life. We must seek and work toward transformation. There is no other way . . . our minds must be renewed so that we will come to grasp better God's will for us and for the world.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

A study of Matthew's Gospel

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Genesis

So where do we get our "being?" Paul provides the Athenians with a solution. It is from God, "in whom we live, move, and have our being" (17:28).

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon (new time!) Tuesday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj's.-- we're on-line now so who'd even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle."

Videos are all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.