

“Blessed Are The Flexible”

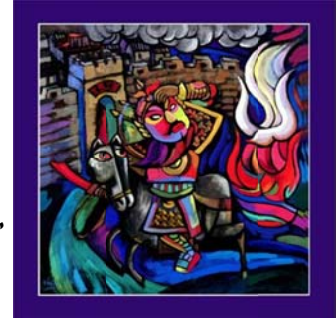
Dr. D. Jay Losher, Jr.

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Acts 9:1-9 = Conversion of Paul

What would it take to make you re-examine a viewpoint? Would it take more or less than it took with Paul on the Damascus road? Flannery O'Connor said of Paul:

“I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.”



Acts only uses the verb “to persecute” in reference to Paul. The Bible says **“breathing threats and murder against the disciples.”** Acts depicts Paul as a murderous enemy of the risen Jesus, obsessed with killing all his followers and wiping out the people of the Way.

When Paul did meet the risen Jesus, his life flipped 180 degrees. He went from the greatest enemy of Jesus to the greatest follower of Jesus, the apostle to the gentiles. Only the power of God could accomplish such a change, could redirect a life so completely, so dramatically, so diametrically. Only the power of God could change his bravado into childlike dependence on others.



Saul entered God’s kingdom as Saul, he came out as Paul. He was a changed man ~ a truly different person. Our God is in the change business. God is in the business of transforming lives for the good.

There are several ways to go about improving our lives. Our first inclination is to think we can do it ourselves. In the movie *Groundhog Day* Bill Murray’s character is a jaded weather reporter, a superficial person in a job he really hates. He is stuck in time until he can get his life on track. His punishment for being a jerk is no matter what he does every morning he wakes up to repeat the same awful, wearisome Groundhog Day.





There is no escape. He tries everything, he even commits suicide. Yet every morning he still arises to Sonny & Cher singing “*I’ve got you, Babe.*” Indeed this could be a pretty accurate definition of hell.

Murray attempts to free himself from hellish repetition thru heroic self-improvement. When he succeeds we all cheer. This would seem to be a suitable parable for life in Jesus’ way, but it is actually quite the opposite!

“The story that the modern world thinks it is now living ~ [is to] take charge of your life and transform yourself into someone worth loving. [To unflinching pursue a goal] and use your time to make a life worth living. You [make your own meaning in life. That’s what the world thinks.]



Christians [know this] to be a lie. Christians believe another story than that of *Groundhog Day*.

Today’s account of the conversion of Paul shows a person who receives a different life, not as the result of his choices or striving but rather as the result of God’s intervention. Our lives are what they are as gifts [of God] not of our own devising.”



How do we tell the difference? Bill Murray’s character had a voice in his head saying “get me out of here.” He acted on it. How is that so different from God’s voice? How do we differentiate voices in our head from God’s speaking to us? Many people who say God told them to do something typically aren’t making much of a departure from their own comfort zone. Isn’t it funny that what I wanted anyway is what God wanted? Yet with persons like Paul who have changed the whole direction of their lives, this is much more likely to be the authentic voice of God.

Paul’s story is radically different from Bill Murray’s character ~ 180° different. The God of American popular religion is the passive god of *Groundhog Day* where we have to figure it all out



for ourselves. The true story of the God we see in Scripture is a God who acts on us and renews us for the good.

This 'god' of popular culture is helpful and useful in getting whatever we want in life. But this urbane, therapeutic god never actually gets around to doing anything and never challenges us nor asks anything of us ~ certainly not the sort of God to appear in visions and strike anyone blind.

“That’s how you can tell the difference between a true, living God and a dead, false god. A fake, noninterventionist god will never surprise you.”²

Our God is not a passive, “whatever” kind of god. Our God is in the surprise business. Our God is in the transformation business. C. S. Lewis wrote about his conversion experience under the title: **Surprised by Joy**. Like Paul, Lewis experienced God’s call as surprise. We too can experience God calling us in surprising, renovating, restoring ways ~ if we are flexible enough to let God in.

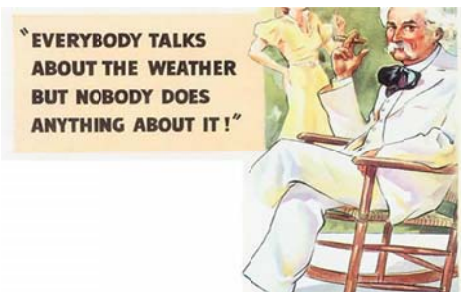


Maybe there is a lost beatitude:

“Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be broken.”

What would it take to make you re-examine a viewpoint? More than that: What would it take to make you change a viewpoint 180 degrees?

Mark Twain said “Everybody talks about the weather but nobody ever does anything about it.” This applies just as much to God’s transforming power. We talk about the new life in Christ, but what do we do about it? Observation of healthy, growing churches is that they actually do a lot about that.



Years ago, the pastor of a thriving NCD in Dallas speaking to Presbytery said simply: “What is happening at our congregation? We are all about changed lives.”

Management guru Peter Drucker says of the life of congregations:



“The business of a church is to change people; the business of a corporation is to satisfy them.’ This is, I believe, a statement that ... forces each of us to ask the question, ‘are people being [transformed] in my congregation?’ If the answer is no, then my church has a different purpose, and that purpose probably is to satisfy people.”³



Mission statements often include: “Open Hearts, Open Minds” or some variation, and that’s great as far as it goes. Yet a more consistently Biblical, a far more appropriate mission statement would be “Changed Hearts, Changed Minds.” That’s the mission statement of a strong congregation.

It’s true, thriving churches are all about God changing lives and transforming communities, but none of us really likes change, none of us embraces it. Our natural inclination is to resist. Yet, resistance is futile. Paul tried to resist God and see where it got him: blind, helpless, nearly dead.

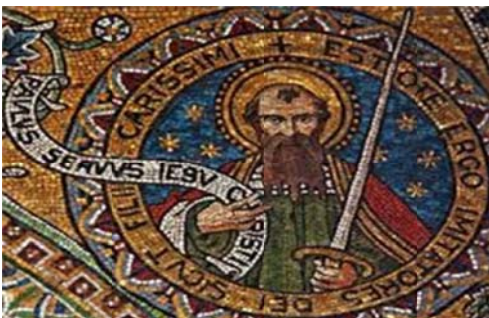


There are three ways we respond to change:

1. we try to resist it, usually failing.
2. we are open to it, embracing it.
3. we go past openness to becoming innovators. We initiate change.

God’s desire is for us to choose door #3.

What would it take to make you change your life 180 degrees? Paul’s call, his conversion, shows how God intervenes in a resister and turns him into an initiator. That is God’s Way ~ full of surprises and surprising transformation. God’s call to us also is to move from ignoring, even



resisting God's transformation to become innovators, initiators for God's community.

There is a cost involved with everything, and the cost of being a Christian, a follower of the Way. *is* a changed life, an improved life, a changed direction in our lives, not by our own accomplishments but by a gift from God.. But wait a dog-gone minute, come to think of it, transformation doesn't represent a cost, but a reward ~ not a loss, but a gain ~ not a liability, but a benefit.

The lost beatitudes:



¹ *Pulpit Resource* 4/18/2010, pp. 19-20

² *Ibid*

³ C. Kirk Hadaway, *Behold I Do A New Thing*, p. 11