



On May 7th I will begin a series of messages titled *Life Lessons On Faith*. The messages will cover some of the things I have learned over the years about both life and faith, from my own experience and from the experience of others.

I love to ski. Snow skiing or water skiing, I love them both. Ten or twelve years ago, Tyler and I traveled with a group to Beckley, West Virginia for a snow skiing trip. We had both tried snowboarding at Paoli a couple of times and thought we would give it a try on a “real” mountain.

Snowboarding requires one to accept some interesting contradictions, one of which is that you must accept some level of risk, while at the same time being told – in very subtle ways – that you must be crazy for what you are about to do. Every time you pick up a piece of equipment and when you pay your money you are asked to sign a liability release form, agreeing that you will not hold the owners liable for injuries. The first time you sign you just accept the fact that there is some personal liability, but after about six times you begin to sense there is a very real possibility of injury. And then the real contradictions begin, as everything the instructors tell you begin with this phrase – *we want everyone to be safe*. My thought was *no you don't*. *If you want everyone to be safe you would recommend that we go home and sit on the couch rather than strapping a board to our feet and sliding down the side of a mountain at 50 mph!*

But, in spite of our better judgment, we strapped that board to our feet, went out in the freezing cold, and rode up to the top of the mountain. But to get to the top of the mountain you have to ride the ski lift. How many of you have been on a ski lift? If you have, you know the first challenge – the lift never stops. It is quite a trick to position yourself, with a big board strapped to your feet, in just the right place to be able to get on this snow and ice covered chair that is coming at you faster than it should. And if you manage to get on the chair, you ride up the mountain, about 50 feet in the air, on this snow and ice covered lift with a heavy board strapped to your feet that is trying to pull you out of the chair. And if you think it's a challenge to get in a chair that doesn't stop moving, just wait until it's time to get out. It seems as though the lift actually speeds up when it's time to get out. You have to jump out of the chair, hope you land without

falling down – because there are people right behind you – and then you must navigate not only getting off the lift while remaining upright, but then you notice you must take a sharp right, because at the bottom of this small hill is a brick wall, designed, of course, by people who *care about your safety!* And at the top of the wall is a big window at the back of the lodge, and the window is filled with people watching this show of all of us trying to get safely off the lift while also avoiding the brick wall. That’s when you realize it’s all a setup. The people in the window should be paying all the money for the entertainment!

And then you look down the trail, and you note that the trail winds not only down the steep side of a mountain, but also through a lot of trees, and not only down a mountain and between trees, but there are all these big bumps they have constructed just to make things more interesting. And then you think, *the people that designed this trail are the same people that keep assuring me they want everyone to be safe.* It took a while, but we finally made it to the bottom of the mountain, strapped to a board with no brake on it. Amazingly, after all those challenges and the risk of injury, the first thought that goes through your mind upon making it safely to the bottom of the mountain is, *I think I’ll do that again. And it will be fine, because they care about my safety!*

Here’s where that story becomes a parable – a life of faith can seem, at time, very illogical and non-intuitive. Why would we give away our time? Why would we give away our resources? Why would we love our enemies? Why would we pray for those who persecute us? Why would we extend grace and forgiveness? Why? Do any of those things make sense?

Well, yes, in fact, they do, and it is because of the transformation that takes place in our hearts and minds when one is a follower of Jesus. Our perspective changes, our way of thinking changes, our way of living changes, the way in which we see others changes, and the way in which we see the world changes. The classic, archetypal example of this is undoubtedly the most famous conversion story in all of history – Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. Follow along as I read that passage from Acts 9:1-19 –

1 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 holy people 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 proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to 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.

There are particular words and phrases I want to focus on from that passage, the first one being –

1. Connection, Grace, and Acceptance.

It was the poet John Donne who penned the immortal words *no man is an island, entire of itself*. One of the great truths of Scripture is that we are created to be in relationships – connected to one another. Much of the beauty, joy, and richness in life come from those relationships.

Notice what God does for Paul. God sends Ananias to restore Paul's sight – as he was blinded by the light at his conversion – because Paul needed to be connected to people, and he needed, now that he had been converted, to be connected to the church. Note what Ananias calls Paul – he calls him *brother*. Ananias is calling the man who only a short time before was *breathing threats and murder* (verse 1) against believers such as Ananias, a fact that was not lost on Ananias, as he pointed that out to God – "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the

chief priests to arrest all who call on your name” (verses 13-14). Amazingly, it is only a short time later that Ananias is with Paul, placing his hands on him and calling him *Brother Saul* (verse 17). Brother! Now there’s quite an amazing change in attitude.

Imagine what it must have been like for people in the early church to suddenly encounter Paul no longer as an agent of persecution, but as a brother in Christ. Saul had presided over the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54-8:1) and then he is suddenly showing up in churches – not to arrest or persecute anyone, but to worship with them! Imagine how difficult it must have been for people to accept the newly christened Paul. No longer was he Saul, the persecutor of the church, but the one who would go down in history as Paul, second only to Jesus in terms of influence upon the church. Understandably, it was not easy for some people to trust Paul.

If you read on to verse 27 you discover another person God brings into Paul’s life – Barnabas. Luke tells us that as Paul was *trying to associate with the disciples...they were all afraid of him, not believing he was a disciple. But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles* and told the others it was a genuine conversion (verses 26-27). The name Barnabas means *son of consolation, or encourager*. What a great match between name and personality! Barnabas gives his stamp of approval to Paul, and what a difference that made for Paul. Barnabas was the kind of person we all want in our lives, as he was someone who was loyal, and graceful, and encouraging – a positive person in so many ways. Have we ever taken up for someone as Barnabas did for Paul? Have we ever had someone take up for us as Barnabas did for Paul? Here is *connection, acceptance, and grace*, exhibited in so many powerful ways.

2. Humility, Vulnerability, and Trust.

I am not one who enjoys reading through owner’s manuals or instruction manuals. Generally, when I open a package I set aside the instructions (sometimes I even throw them away) and begin trying to manage without the instructions. I’ve been humbled many times, of course, by having to dig through the waste basket looking for the owner’s manual, forced to admit I didn’t know what I was doing. Who loves to admit they are wrong? Who loves to ask for help? Who loves to ask for forgiveness? Why are those so difficult? For one, they require a lot of humility.

Imagine Paul’s circumstances. Here he is, the mighty Saul going after the followers of Jesus, with the blessing of the authorities, but after being blinded by the light at his conversion Luke says this in verse 8 – *he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him to Damascus.*

Leading him by the hand. Talk about a big dose of humility! Paul was in the unfamiliar position of needing the help of others. It’s tough to admit to vulnerability, isn’t it? And being led by the hand! Even a child gets to the point, at a relatively young age, that they don’t want to be led anywhere by the hand. Tanya and I were in Target yesterday, and there was a boy about two years old who was walking through the store with his mother. She was holding to his hand, which he didn’t seem to like, and he

suddenly broke free and was off and running through the store. No one likes to be led by the hand!

Humility is often born of vulnerability, and that was certainly a moment of vulnerability for Paul. We don't like to be vulnerable, do we? We don't like the idea of needing anyone else, and when we do find ourselves in the position of needing help in some way we sometimes become angry and we lash out in the anger at those who try and help us.

And trust. Imagine Paul being led, blind, by the hand. He was, quite literally putting himself in the hands of others.

3. Transformation.

Listen to what William Barclay has written – *counterfeit Christianity is always safe; real Christianity is always in peril.*

(*The Acts of the Apostles*, The Daily Study Bible Series, rev. ed., William Barclay. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 1976, p. 75).

We know almost nothing about Paul's life prior to his conversion, but we see that his life after his conversion was always full of peril. Listen to his summation of just some of his difficulties in II Corinthians 11:23-28 – *if far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without numbers, often in danger of death. Five times I received...thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among the false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches.*

Well, sign me up, right away! How about you? But notice that Paul never expresses any sense of regret. In his letter to the Philippians, written just before his martyrdom, he expresses no regret and no sadness. No, Paul only expresses joy. He expressed joy because of the amazing transformation that had come to his life. It is transformation that God desires to bring to all of our lives. We may not have as dramatic of a transformation as Paul experienced on the road to Damascus, but God calls to each of us, just as he did to Paul, and may we each heed that call.