

Biggest Loser 4

In the TV show *The Biggest Loser*, even though I've only seen parts of it on a few occasions, it is profoundly clear how big of a role the coaches play. Obviously the contestants are chosen according to their poor lifestyle and health habits and it is the coaches responsibility to lead the participants through a transformation of thinking and lifestyle which will lead to weight loss and better health. It is a lot about the body but it is also a lot about the mind.

This side of the completion of the New Testament, we appreciate and marvel at the impact one man had on the world for Christ. The man named Paul. But Paul was not born into the faith. No one is. In fact, he was born in sin and rose to become the self-described chief of sinners. 1 Tim 1:15

We discussed last week how the beginning of Paul's conversion experience may very likely have begun as he supervised and witnessed the stoning of faithful deacon Stephen. Let's study Paul's conversion and early days as a follower of Christ. Then, we will look particularly at the coaches that played a significant role in Paul's quick transformation.

1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, either men or women, he might bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he traveled and was nearing Damascus, a light from heaven suddenly flashed around

him. ⁴ Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" ⁵ "Who are You, Lord?" he said. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," He replied. ⁶ "But get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the sound but seeing no one. ⁸ Then Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. So they took him by the hand and led him into Damascus. ⁹ He was unable to see for three days, and did not eat or drink. Acts 9:1-8 (HCSB)

Photo- Memorial of Jesus appearance to Saul on the road to Damascus

This man was evil. He had hatred and violence running through his veins. His heart was cold and his resolve to wipe out the church was steadfast and passionate. Seeing the peace and faith of Stephen may have even served, at least for a time, to agitate his contempt for Christians (heaping coals of fire on his head). The concerns over Saul's reported threats and murder I'm sure were stirring absolute terror among the fledgling church. Saul was a terrorist working under the approval of the high priest of Judaism.

But then, Jesus Himself suddenly appeared while Saul was on his way to do more harm to the church in Damascus. Probably anything less than a personal visit from Christ Himself would not have worked to turn this man's cold, dead heart from his hatred and evil to genuine faith. He no doubt was wonderfully and gloriously saved.

Had the church been praying for deliverance from Saul or had they been praying for Saul's conversion?

Saul's blindness must have been a not so gentle reminder that Jesus was not exactly who Saul thought He was. He was the God Saul thought he was serving. The blindness forced the proud, self-reliant Pharisee to humbly rely on those who on those he once led to lead Him. Certainly this was part of Jesus' lesson to teach Saul to give up his pride and self-serving agenda and begin to humbly trust and serve God.

10 Now in Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. And the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Here I am, Lord!" he said. **11** "Get up and go to the street called Straight," the Lord said to him, "to the house of Judas, and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, since he is praying there. **12** In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and placing his hands on him so he may regain his sight." **13** "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard from many people about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. **14** And he has authority here from the chief priests to arrest all who call on Your name." **15** But the Lord said to him, "Go! For this man is My chosen instrument to carry My name before Gentiles, kings, and the sons of Israel. **16** I will certainly show him how much he must suffer for My name!" **17** So Ananias left and entered the house. Then he placed his hands on him and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road you were traveling, has sent me so you may regain your sight and

be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸ At once something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. ¹⁹ And after taking some food, he regained his strength. ... Saul was with the disciples in Damascus for some days. Acts 9:10-19 (HCSB)

Photos- Street called Straight entrance, Street called Straight, home where Ananias came and ministered to Saul

How important was Ananias to Saul’s conversion and spiritual beginnings? Somewhere between huge, massive and gargantuan. Of course it was Jesus who appeared, spoke to and began the work of transformation of Saul’s heart, but this Ananias was Saul’s first coach in the ways of Christ. Ananias went to the house where Saul was staying, prayed for him, explained to Saul how Jesus brought them together, possibly was instrumental on completing the salvation experience, and then baptized him.

Ananias fulfilled a crucial role in the mission of the church as he taught and ministered to this new disciple. Remember, according to Jesus, the mission of the church is to make and teach disciples.

²⁰ Immediately he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues: “He is the Son of God.” ²¹ But all who heard him were astounded and said, “Isn’t this the man who, in Jerusalem, was destroying those who called on this name, and then came here for the purpose of taking them as prisoners to the chief priests?” ²² But Saul grew more capable, and kept confounding the Jews who lived in

Damascus by proving that this One is the Messiah. ²³ After many days had passed, the Jews conspired to kill him, ²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. So they were watching the gates day and night intending to kill him, ²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and lowered him in a large basket through [an opening in] the wall. Acts 9:20-25 (HCSB)

How and why did Saul begin so quickly proclaiming the gospel? For one, he was gloriously saved through a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and He was called right out of that conversion experience to preach. Jesus revealed Saul's calling Ananias to "carry His name to the gentiles." Ananias was Saul's coach or mentor in Damascus.

²⁶ When he arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to associate with the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, since they did not believe he was a disciple. ²⁷ Barnabas, however, took him and brought him to the apostles and explained to them how, on the road, Saul had seen the Lord, and that He had talked to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ Saul was coming and going with them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ He conversed and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they attempted to kill him. ³⁰ When the brothers found out, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. ³¹ So the church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace, being built up and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the

encouragement of the Holy Spirit, and it increased in numbers. **Acts 9:26-31** (HCSB)

Barnabas was Saul's coach/mentor in Jerusalem. He stood up and spoke for Saul. He introduced him to the disciples and told his story for him. This second stage in the early days of Saul's life could have been a make it or break it situation considering how most of the disciples rejected Saul. What if Barnabas had not taken Saul under his spiritual wing and defended him. Might Saul have turned back to his old ways?

Lessons for a **Healthy churches:**

Pray for the lost, not against them, even those who hate, persecute, and kill. I propose that the church was bombarding heaven with prayers for Saul's salvation. Maybe these prayers were driven by fear of him, but none the less, it is more reasonable and likely, considering the radical change in his life, that they prayed more for, or at least as much as, his salvation as protection from his rampage against the church.

We must pray more frequently and fervently for the lost. But not in general. We must pray specifically for those whom the Lord puts in our lives and lays on our hearts. We don't see more salvations in this church because we don't pray enough for people who are lost.

When the church started out, they were seeing daily conversions. How? Why? Prayer was a foundational ingredient.

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayers.

Acts 2:42 (HCSB)

Coach new believers. When a newborn baby is born into a family, they don't just stick the kid in the nursery and say "Take care of yourself. We'll see you when you're grown up." We don't stick them in a room full of books and "Get educated." We don't hand them a glove, bat, and ball and say "go play baseball." And, we shouldn't just stick a brand new believer a Sunday School class and say "catch up."

New believers, young Christians need coaches, mentors to help them catch up. Saul had Ananias and Barnabas. Who did you have?

Who have you coached? Who have you stood up for? Who have you instructed in the ways of Christ? Who have you disciplined?

Saul, after being disciplined, took on Barnabas, Silas, Timothy and many others and disciplined them. The churches throughout Asia were scattered with pastors who had been Paul's disciples.

What kind of legacy will you leave?

² And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. ² Tim 2:2 (HCSB)

This is the very heart of the work of the church to pass on to others that which we have been instructed by. This is teaching disciples.

Come along side new believers.

This is the other half of coaching, mentoring, discipling. We need to come along side, stand up for, defend, speak for, and be a friend to new believers. The teaching will not get far without the relationship. New believers need new friends. One of the most dangerous things for a new believer is old friends. They need new ones, real ones, with a depth of caring and serving like they never have or ever will see anywhere else in the world.

25 not staying away from our meetings, as some habitually do, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day drawing near. **Heb 10:25** (HCSB)

I frequently run into people who are confident in their salvation but have no use for the church, especially a local congregation. Their extreme selfishness has distorted their thinking. We are instructed to encourage each other. You may not need me, but I need you. The truth is we need each other and especially new believers need the warm, sincere fellowship of the church.

Affirm gifts and callings. Remember, Jesus revealed Saul's calling to Ananias before He even revealed it to Saul himself....When I was considering God's call on my life to enter the ministry, I first shared it with my best friend. He said, "I know." What an affirmation!

When you see God working in someone's life, you must affirm that. It may be the very word they need to hear.

Healthy churches have lots of people like Stephen, Ananias, and Barnabas.