

INTRODUCTION

Franco Santoriello was one of the biggest name bodybuilders of his time. On stage he was a worldwide celebrity, but behind the scenes his life was full of drug addiction, severe anxiety, and depression. Franco eventually became unemployed, homeless, suicidal, and spent three years in a state penitentiary prison.

The turning point for Franco was surrendering his life to Jesus Christ. Franco exchanged his mess for a victorious and purposeful life that only God could provide. Franco's transformation is his testimony. Today his ministry is a message of encouragement, motivation, and inspiration for the broken-hearted that there is hope, life, victory, and a glorious future in Jesus Christ.

“And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.”

1 Peter 5:10

(This study will include some questions for you to ponder; questions to help you take a real inventory of yourself. There will also be some scriptural references that are a part of Franco's strict “spiritual diet” that have transformed his life in Christ. Real transformation, real recovery, and understanding your real identity and purpose is grounded in God's Word. Know, understand, and focus on who God says you are, not how the world or those in it define you. You are valued and you are loved.)

Questions

Does your family, friends, and co-workers only see your “highlight reel?”
What does your life really look like behind the scenes? Does it match your “on stage life?”
If there is emptiness in your life, how have you tried to fill that void?
Where does your happiness come from? What gives you peace?

Further reading

2 Timothy 3:2-4, 1 Corinthians 15:57, Philippians 4:6-7

STEP 1: SURRENDER

"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."
James 4:7

"Surrender" = Giving up, submitting control, power, and authority to another.

In chapter 9 of Franco's book, Before & After, Franco was sitting in his prison cell. He cried out to Jesus for help, and surrendered his life to Jesus. Franco's two most important spoken words in his life are, "I surrender!" Franco was tired of destructively living life his way. Franco put his faith and trust in God to start living God's way.

"because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." **Romans 10:9**

You maybe sitting in jail reading this right now. You might be standing on the ledge of life confused, hopeless, depressed; experiencing death, divorce, anger, or excruciating pain. No matter what your circumstances are, there is hope and life in Jesus. And it starts with **surrender**.

- 1) Cry out to Jesus for help (**Psalms 57:2**)
- 2) Confess that your sinful ways are a life of destruction (**1 John 1:9**)
- 3) Believe that Jesus died for your sins and was raised from the dead (**John 3:16**)
- 4) Surrender your life to Jesus and follow Him (**Galatians 2:20**)

You can embrace this truth, this new life in Christ, and believe, but it does not mean you have to understand it all. We can't and never will understand everything, but we can trust God who does.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." **Proverbs 3:5-6**

God allowed Franco and He allows us to experience brokenness and loss in our lives so we can hopefully realize that we have very little control over our lives. Our fallen and cursed world deceives us into thinking we are our own saviors and we don't need to be saved. We can become blinded and fooled by the comforts of this world.

Surrendering your life to Jesus is a daily breath by breath commitment, not a one-time event.

No matter what you have done, God forgives you and loves you. He is not disappointed in you. His mercy and grace is endless. He loves you too much.

“For God so loved (YOU) the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn (YOU) the world, but in order that (YOU) the world might be saved through him.”

John 3:16-17

Questions

Surrendering to God means you give Him authority over your life. Is Jesus Christ the Lord of your life? Lord of it all? What has authority over your life today? What do you worship?

What or who do you put your faith and trust into today? How often are you let down?

Do you remember the first time you cried out to Jesus? The first time you confessed? The first time you believed? The first time you surrendered?

Relive those moments daily. Recommit your life daily to Jesus. Never forget your first love!

Further reading

Psalms 139:13-18, 2 Peter 3:9, 1 John 4:15-18,

STEP 2: CARRY YOUR CROSS / CARRY YOUR BOX

“And Jesus said to all (YOU), “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” Luke 9:23

In the opening pages of Franco's book, Before & After, Franco described the humiliating experience and struggle of carrying a two-foot steel box across the prison property and up a staircase. Once a world famous bodybuilder who lifted hundreds of pounds with ease, was now struggling to carry this box a hundred yards. Franco's box was full of fear. All the self destructive years of drug and alcohol abuse had taken a tremendous physical, emotional, and spiritual toll on his body, mind, and spirit. Franco was a dead man walking.

Step one was surrender; you surrender your life to Jesus. What's next? Does life become all roses and rainbows? No, in fact when you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you are essentially declaring war on the world. Things may appear to get a whole lot worse before they get better. Did Franco become a mess overnight? No. Did you? No. Don't expect things to get better overnight either. Circumstances are temporary; God's love for you is eternal. When you surrender your life to Jesus and follow Him, it's the hardest thing you will ever do. But the rewards last forever.

“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,” 2 Corinthians 4:16-17

- 1) Surrender. When you surrender your life to Christ, you are not your own. You don't call the shots anymore. (Remember how that worked out when you did?) The old you is dead; you are a new creation in Christ. **(1 Corinthians 6:19, 2 Corinthians 5:17)**
- 2) Deny yourself. Your emotions and decisions apart from God's counsel cannot be trusted. Man's wisdom is foolish and faulty. Seek God's perfect wisdom. Only God knows what is best for your life. **(1 Corinthians 3:18-20)**
- 3) Carry your cross daily. Have proper expectations knowing that following Jesus instead of the world and culture is a daily grind. You won't be able to do it yourself. **(Hebrews 10:24-25)**
- 4) Follow Jesus. Church leaders equip you, but you don't follow man, you follow Jesus Christ. **(1 Corinthians 1:12-13)**

Questions

Franco's box was full of fear. What's in your box? What burdens are you trying to carry? Whatever is in your box, you have to give it up to Christ. What do you have to give Him?

Further reading

John 15:18-19, 1 John 4:18, Matthew 11:28-30

STEP 3: EMBRACE GOD'S GRACE

Step one was surrendering your life to Jesus; no longer your way, but His way. Your way leads to death, but Jesus's way leads to life, eternal life. Cry out to Jesus for help, confess your sins, and believe that Jesus died for your sins.

*"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds **you** have been healed." 1 Peter 2:24*

Step two was "carrying your cross" daily which means that following Jesus is hard, it means you may lose relationships, material things, or even your life. You deny yourself; saying no to yourself and yes to God. And you follow Jesus; not man, not the world, not religion.

"Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6

Franco Santoriello did not become one of the world top bodybuilders overnight. It took many years and thousands of dedicated hours in the gym to achieve the level of fitness he achieved.

But at the moment Franco believed and accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior he was saved. He became spiritually alive in Christ. His salvation, the promise of eternal life, was graciously given to him. And this is true for all who believe in Jesus Christ. We are justified by faith alone. There is nothing you nor anyone can do to earn eternal life. There is nothing in your past that disqualifies you from what Jesus freely offers you, and you cannot lose what has been freely given and accepted.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Ephesians 2:8-9

We preface this before we share Franco's workout because there are no works you can do that will save you. Jesus already paid the price for your sins on the cross. God loves you too much to leave you where you are. He wants to transform you from the inside-out into the man or woman that He has created you to be.

Questions

The grace of God is a free gift. Have you accepted His grace?
Do you feel undeserving of God's grace? Do you feel unqualified?
Have you been trying to earn His grace by works? By religion?

Further reading

Romans 5:8-11, Luke 14:26-27, Romans 3:23-24

STEP 4: THE WORKOUT

"I can do all things through him who strengthens me." **Philippians 4:13 ESV**

We surrender to God. We turn from our sinful ways and follow Jesus. We walk in confidence and victory because by God's free gift of grace we are secure. We understand how difficult the journey will be so we rely on God, not the world, to show us the way. God gives us His Son Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the church, the body of Christ, for guidance, protection, and support. You are not alone.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

John 1:1

1) GOD'S WORD

Franco was in his jail cell crying out to Jesus to help him. Franco had accepted Jesus as his Savior twenty years prior, but Jesus was never Lord of his life. Franco was living life his way and it had led him to prison. Franco surrendered his life in that moment to Jesus.

It was under a blanket on his prison bed when Franco first heard God speak to him. Franco listened and picked up a Bible and started reading God's Word. Franco immediately felt peace.

How are you going to follow Jesus if you don't listen to Him? No relationship grows stronger and deeper without constant communication. When you spend time in God's Word, you draw closer and nearer to Him. The more you know and recognize God's voice, His truth, His guidance, and His promises for you, the easier it becomes to recognize the deceptive lies that our world is screaming.

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Romans 12:2

Franco began reading his Bible each day. Franco said, " *It was renewing my mind day and night. It was by the Word of God that He was able to transform my mind into the mind of Christ.*"

Up until then, Franco allowed the world to define him. He identified and saw himself as a " *drug addict, convict, and a has-been.*" Satan and his playground, our world, will shackle you with shame, guilt, and fear desiring you to believe that you are not good enough or even too good enough to need a savior.

But that's the transforming power of God's Word. Franco's mind was being renewed daily. His new identity in Christ had given him hope and promise. Franco, as he stated in his book, embraced his new identity as " *a son of God, an heir to Christ, and a citizen of Heaven.*" No longer would the world define him. God's Word transformed Franco, and it will transform yours.

God's Word is the sword of the Spirit. Franco relied on God's Word alone which is part of the armor that God gives His children to fight the spiritual battle. God's Word is the truth that prevails against the lies and deception of Satan and the world.

"In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" Ephesians 6:16-17

"Reading God's Word is crucial to developing spiritual muscle because the Word is our spiritual food." ~ Franco Santoriello

Questions

Are you communicating daily with God?

Are you doing all the talking and asking or are you listening to God?

Although God is always near, we can become distant from God. What other ways can you draw closer to God? Your heavenly Father delights in hearing from you!

Further reading

Hebrews 4:12, Matthew 4:4, 2 Timothy 3:16-17

2) PRAYER

"God desires to hear from us continuously about the good things with prayers of praise and thanksgiving, and in our trials. Letting Him know we desperately need His help. God loves to hear from us just like we like to hear from our children." ~ Franco Santoriello

God, our Heavenly Father, wants to spend time with you, His precious child. He wants a moment by moment ongoing conversation with you. God is not looking for pretty eloquent prayers. He wants quality time spent together so that you know Him better. He wants your heart to break for what breaks His heart. He wants you to delight in what brings Him joy.

"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." John 15:7

"We need to ask God for His desires to become our desires, then His will becomes ours. That's how you get your prayers answered! You see when we allow the love of God to dwell in us and His living word is inside our hearts and minds and we pray and ask and if it is in His will it's done for you. Wow how about that!" ~ Franco Santoriello

"Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." Psalms 37:4

Questions

How often do you pray to God?
What do your prayers look like? Are you seeking God's will or yours?
How often do you pray for others?

Further Reading

Matthew 6:9-13, Matthew 7:7, 1 John 5:14-15

3) WORSHIP

"Put on the garment of praise when you have a spirit of heaviness! That's how we fight our battles! Praise is the breakthrough. We praise God when we are under attack."
~ Franco Santoriello

When we spend time reading and obeying God's Word and having prayerful conversation with God, God's character is revealed to us. Our response is worship. God alone is worthy of our praise. In worship, we are praising, thanking, and acknowledging all that God is and

all that He does for us. Nobody has a better plan for your life than the one who created you.

“You shall have no other gods before me.” Exodus 20:3

“And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.” Matthew 22:37-38

Your whole life, all your days, each and every breath, should be worshipping God. Not just on a Sunday morning church service.

“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Colossians 3:17

God's Word says that your worship, your praise and love for Him, involves sacrifice. Sacrificing what you desire by serving God and others. Jesus came to serve, not be served, and He made the ultimate sacrifice by dying on a cross for you.

Questions

- What does Franco say the breakthrough was?
- When was the last time you gave praise when you were under attack? When your circumstances were undesired?
- What sacrifices can you make in your life that will bring glory and praise to God?

Further reading

Psalms 139:13-14, Romans 12:1, Mark 10:43-45

4) ACTS OF SERVICE

“And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Matthew 22:39

With humility, we are called to serve others. To put others needs before our own. Our world says take care of yourself, serve yourself. The world says you are entitled to be self-centered. God says to be Christ-centered.

Franco was reading his Bible daily as God was transforming and renewing his mind. Franco was in constant prayer crying out to God for help and thanking Him for reminding him that he is a child of God, not an addict and a convict. Franco gets on his knees to worship his King Jesus, and he gets on the ground on his face to worship his Lord, his Master. Franco refers to this as his "4 bar signal" with God; the best reception for him to hear from God.

When God's Word is in Franco's heart and on his mind, when he is in prayer and communication with God his commander in chief, and when he is worshipping his Lord Jesus Christ, Franco Santoriello is "all in, on fire, and sold out for Jesus." Franco wants to share the love, mercy, and grace that God has for him with others, not out of obligation, but out of gratitude and joy in pleasing his Heavenly Father.

Franco's book talks about the Bible studies he started for his inmates while in prison, the service to a young recovering addict who moved in with him and his wife, the care of a paraplegic man, and the love of a young boy with a chronic illness. Franco was paying forward the love that God had always given him. When serving others, Franco describes his life as full of JOY = *Jesus, Others, Yourself*.

God wants to use you like he is using Franco Santoriello. The biggest lie you can believe is that you are not good enough. That you are damaged goods, that you are beyond repair, beyond help. That you are not qualified to be used for God's glory. That is a lie. God has great plans for your life.

Franco surrendered his mess to Jesus. His mess became his message which became his ministry (www.francostrategy.com, www.Jackdup4jesus.com) and a movement focused on encouraging, motivating, and inspiring the broken, bound, and bruised to living a victorious and purposeful life in Christ. Franco understands as a follower of Christ that he can't do this or anything alone. He has the local church; a community of believers, and the power of the Holy Spirit residing in him, to guide, support, and protect the wonderful works that God is doing through him.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Questions

Are you living a self-centered life or a God-centered life?

Who are you serving?

How can God use your brokenness like He is using Franco's so that your experiences and your story can bring comfort and healing to others?

Further reading

Philippians 2:3-11, Jeremiah 29:11, Matthew 25:35-40