

Session #1 – Living the Transformational Life – Going Deeper

Premise

As we follow Jesus, we transform. Transformation is fundamentally different from making “changes.” The original word for “transform” is *metamorphosis* or evolving into a different being altogether.

Key Scripture Passage

Romans 12:2 (HCSB) Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

What makes a good story?

What makes a good story? A good movie? A good book? Is it the characters? The setting? The imagery used by the author? While all of these things are arguably very important in the making of an interesting and compelling story, most of us would agree that these are not the only driving factors that lead us to sit on the edge of our theater seats or cause us to keep reading into the wee hours of the morning. What will keep us glued to our chairs is a character who consistently develops throughout the plot of the story, resolving conflict and becoming a better or changed person for it.

Something deep within us longs to see a main character grow, change, and thrive as he or she overcomes obstacles.

This is perhaps why we groan a little bit inwardly (or outwardly) at the beginning, middle, and end of a Hallmark Christmas movie. While we love a happy ending, and we even crave predictability at times, something even deeper within us longs to see a main character grow, change, and thrive as he or she overcomes obstacles.

Think of the beloved NBC television series, *The Office*, for example. If you’ve never seen it, the title is fairly straightforward. This nine-season sitcom follows the ordinary lives of the employees of Dunder Mifflin, a fictitious paper company in Scranton, Pennsylvania. It isn’t action-packed or terribly exciting. The lives of the characters are ordinary indeed, and most of their personalities in the early seasons are hardly likable. Michael Scott is annoying. Kevin is not terribly intelligent. Pam is boring. And Meredith is just plain awful.

However, as viewers journey with these characters over the nine seasons, they start to root for the characters that once got under their skin. They just want Michael to find love. They root for Kevin as an underdog. They cheer on Pam as she walks across a bed of coals. And they can see that Meredith has a few redeeming qualities here and there.

This isn’t because the viewers just changed their mind about the characters. No, the characters grew and developed and became better people over time as they encountered conflict and resolved it with one another. The viewers saw the characters walk through heartbreak, family challenges and losing coworkers, and they saw them grow from those challenges.

We crave to see people work through problems and conflicts and become better people along the way. Even though we may fail to realize it, we yearn for transformation. And this isn’t just something we long to see on TV or read in books; it is a God-given desire for our own lives (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

John Ortberg, in his book *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, claims that “the desire for transformation lies deep in every human heart. This is why people enter therapy, join health clubs, get into recovery groups, read self-help books, attend motivational seminars, and make New Year’s resolutions.” Humans are looking to improve and grow; it’s part of our nature.

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Most people would not argue with the statement that, at the deepest level, we all want to be better people. Do you think anyone actually wakes up in the morning thinking, “How can I be a worse human being than I was yesterday?” We’ve surely all gone through seasons when we aren’t sure if we can be better, when we feel defeated and discouraged, but the longing for transformation remains.

Metamorphosis

The word “transformation” is different from mere change. The word “transform” is derived from the Greek *metamorphosis* – a word many of us associate with the life cycle of a butterfly. It’s fairly common knowledge that a butterfly isn’t born with wings. A butterfly starts as an egg, which hatches into a caterpillar, which then forms itself into a cocoon, and later emerges as an adult butterfly. The process doesn’t happen overnight; it takes about four weeks.

What many of us don’t know is that inside that cocoon, in the pupa stage, a caterpillar isn’t simply growing a pair of wings. In this stage, the “pupa, though sedentary, is a stage of great internal turmoil and transformation. Nearly all of the larval tissues and organs (eyes, mouth parts, legs, glands, muscles) will be digested and reorganized into the body of the adult butterfly.” Although it sounds a little disgusting, something major and beautiful is happening inside that little guy. He is becoming something new. (Google search for: “Wisconsin Pollinators. Butterfly Life Cycle - Metamorphosis” for an illustrated webpage.)

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Likewise, when we talk about transformation in the spiritual sense, we aren’t talking about just a changed life either. Spiritual transformation isn’t limited to behavior management or self-improvement or getting into a better routine. True spiritual transformation means that we are being reorganized to become something new. New people with new lives. And while that may sound crazy, consider the interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus in the book of John.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. In general, Pharisees didn’t get along well with Jesus. But Nicodemus sensed that there was something special about Him. So he came to Jesus one night to chat and ask some questions. In John 3:3, Jesus says to Nicodemus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Naturally, Nicodemus is pretty confused. He asks, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (vs. 4). Jesus, as gracious as he was, didn’t laugh at Nicodemus, although His response probably didn’t make it a whole lot clearer. He starts talking about water and spirit and flesh and the wind, and Nicodemus doesn’t appear to gain any further understanding, at least at this moment. And while perhaps this exchange is somewhat confusing, even to us now, the “rebirth” that Jesus talks about is the heart of transformation. If birth is the beginning of life, rebirth would thus be the beginning of a life anew.

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So ... what is the new life Jesus invites us into?

Who are we becoming? Who does Jesus want us to become? How do we get there? How do we actually embark on this journey of transformation?

That’s a lot of questions. Let’s start with the end in mind, the finish line.

Most of us probably don’t often ponder the question, “Who am I becoming?” A question like this requires both forward thinking and reflection of the past, the ability to see where we’ve come from and

the direction in which we are headed. “Becoming” is a word that implies we aren’t quite there yet. There is still a journey ahead; I am not yet who I could be.

We will live our entire lives in this “becoming” state, though few of us take the time to consider who we will be when we have finally “arrived.” We tend to live our lives aimlessly, simply letting life’s circumstances shape the way we think and live.

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For those of us who are believers, however, Paul is very clear about the end goal. He outlines very plainly who we are to become: we are to be “conformed to the image of [God’s] Son” (Romans 8:29). Simply put, for the Christian, we reach the finish line when we at last have become like Christ.

Spiritual transformation, much like in the life cycle of a butterfly, does not happen overnight. We don’t become like Jesus the instant we accept his invitation to follow him. In fact, the invitation itself indicates that this life with Jesus is going to be a journey! You can’t follow someone who isn’t going somewhere.

Most who have been believers for some time will acknowledge that the journey is long, and it can be hard and even grueling at times, much like running a marathon. It’s a process that requires training. There are victories and there are defeats. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul’s encouragement is to keep running and keep training:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

Spiritual transformation requires conscious effort because we are continuously being shaped by the people around us, the events going on in our lives and worlds, the media we consume, and the thoughts that consume us. If we aren’t intentionally set on becoming more like Jesus, we will in turn become more like the world. The Apostle Paul knew this, warning his readers to not be “conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

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So how do we do this? For most, the thought of starting a new life seems like a daunting task. Do we really have to start completely over? Clearly it was confusing for Nicodemus. Fortunately, one thing Jesus is clear about is that rebirth, or transformation, is not something we can achieve on our own. This is not a birth of the flesh, but a birth of the Spirit.

Scripture says that we are both flesh and spirit, and there is a war between the two within us. In Galatians 5 we read that the “desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh” (v 17). And unfortunately, when we let our guard down, the desires of our flesh usually come out on top. When left to our own devices, we so often choose the things that will bring short-term gain, worldly power, instant gratification, and temporary pleasure. When we respond in the flesh, we become more like the world, rather than more like Jesus. It is often easier in the moment to give in to the cravings of our flesh rather than train our earthly bodies to live by the Spirit.

Thankfully, we don’t have to do it alone, and in fact, we aren’t expected to. As followers of Jesus, we have been given the Holy Spirit as our Guide, our Comforter, and our Advocate. We can’t will ourselves to become new, no matter how hard we try.

In her book *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, Ruth Haley Barton writes that:

“[the transformation process] is an organic process that goes far beyond mere behavioral tweaks to work deep, fundamental changes at the very core of our being. In the process of transformation the Spirit of God moves us from behaviors motivated by fear and self-protection to trust and abandonment to God; from selfishness and self-absorption to freely offering the gifts of the authentic self; from the ego’s desperate attempts to control the outcomes of our lives to an ability to give ourselves over to the will of God which is often the foolishness of this world. This kind of change is not something we can produce or manufacture for ourselves but it is what we most need. It is what those around us most need ...

It is a phenomenon that is outside the range of what human beings can accomplish on their own. It can only be grasped and experienced through divine intervention. God is the one who initiates and guides the process and brings it to fruition.”

True spiritual transformation requires surrender. We don’t get to control the process. We don’t even get to dictate the outcome. Transformation only occurs when we allow the Holy Spirit to freely move in us, convict and guide us, and speak into our lives. As we established earlier, this is ongoing. It’s not a “one-and-done” occurrence.

The Holy Spirit dwells within us, going with us about our day. Paul commanded the churches of Galatia to walk with the Spirit, be led by the Spirit, live by the Spirit, and to keep in step with the Spirit. And he says when we do those things, we will not cave in to the cravings and desires of our flesh. When we keep the Spirit at the forefront of our minds and our lives, we open ourselves up to the process of transformation and new, abundant life.

How do we train our brains to pay attention to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives?

Many of us have been ignoring the promptings and nudges for so long, we don’t even know what He sounds like. For most of us, paying attention to the Spirit is going to require clearing out some of the noise. Do you leave any space for peace and quiet in your life? Is your daily routine so cluttered with noise and busy-ness that the Holy Spirit couldn’t even get a word in?

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For others of us, we know that the Holy Spirit has been convicting us, but we ignore Him because we just don’t want to do what He is asking of us. We don’t want to do the work; we don’t want to change. Our lives are comfortable as they are. And yet, the longer we ignore the nudge, the more dull our senses become to his voice. Why would He continue to speak to us when we don’t listen?

Walking by the Spirit, living by the Spirit, means that we open ourselves up to the idea of being uncomfortable. It means that we let go of the idea that we are in control of our own lives. We come to see that we ought to make life decisions with the Spirit’s guidance, recognizing that becoming more like Christ is more than a nice thought, but that it should be the very center of our lives.

Truly, the benefits of a life of transformation into the image of Christ are not just for “someday.” We get to experience the fruit of transformation in the here and now. Ruth Haley Barton says, “Spiritual transformation is the process by which Christ is formed in us for the glory of God, for the abundance of our own lives and for the sake of others.” When we become more and more like Jesus, God is glorified, and we get to experience a better life on earth. A life where not only do we experience satisfaction of

knowing who we were created to be, but a life where those around us are impacted positively by the work of the Spirit in our lives.

So how do we know if we are actively being transformed?

While we can't necessarily quantify transformation, some might (understandably) want to measure results. How do we know if we're cooperating with the work of the Spirit in our lives?

Paul tells us plain and simply in Galatians 5 that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." If the Spirit is truly active in our lives, we will begin to see evidence of that via His fruit.

We will not likely see these attributes ever develop to 100%. But there should be progress. When we are engaged with the Holy Spirit's transformational work in us we should be able to look back and see that we love our families, friends, and enemies better than we did last year. We might be more joyful today than we once were. When compared to the past, we might be experiencing more of the peace of Christ, might be becoming more patient, and might be kinder to others.

So ... what *does* make a good story?

The Bible is a book about mankind's journey, the *lower story*, to the heart of God's story, the *upper story*, the grandest and most compelling story of all time. It is about one eternal conflict: good versus evil with one hero, Jesus. The *upper story* is about the big picture, the grand narrative of the fall of mankind in The Garden and God subsequently providing a means of reconciliation of the world to Himself through Christ. The *lower story* contains the details of particular people through various characters in the Bible.

As believers, our stories are being written out as we are being transformed through our walk with Jesus and are caught up in the *upper story*. Like the Biblical characters, we are part of the *lower story*.

In the *Lord of the Rings*, during a respite in their adventures and after they have endured great hardships together, two of the characters (hobbits) have a discussion about how their story might be written. Frodo is the lead character and hero of the story and Sam (aka Samwise) is his best friend and support.

Sam muses out loud as they are walking through the forest: "I wonder if we'll ever be put into songs or tales?"

Turning around, Frodo asks: "What?"

Sam: "I wonder if people will ever say, 'Let's hear about Frodo and the Ring.' And they'll say, 'Yes, that's one of my favorite stories. Frodo was really courageous, wasn't he, Dad?' 'Yes, my boy, the most famous of hobbits. And that's saying a lot.'"

As they continue walking, Frodo says: "You've left out one of the chief characters – Samwise the Brave. I want to hear more about Sam." Then Frodo stops and turns to Sam: "Frodo wouldn't have got far without Sam!"

Sam: "Now Mr. Frodo, you shouldn't make fun; I was being serious."

Frodo: "So was I!"

As they continue to walk, Sam muses to himself: "Samwise the Brave ...?"

As you walk out the Christian life, how do you want your transformation story to read? What will your *lower story* be? How will it be intertwined with the *upper story*? Will you be known as courageous, or brave, or kind, or generous, or servant-hearted, or a good friend?

Who are you becoming?

Going Deeper Reflections

See below for some thoughts on how to go deeper.

1. Ask yourself (and the Holy Spirit) a few questions. Journal your responses and pray that the Spirit will enlighten and embolden you to respond to His leading.
 - a. Am I who I used to be?
 - b. How am I different?
 - c. How am I the same?
 - d. In what ways does my life reflect the character and life of Christ?
 - e. In what ways does my life look like the rest of the world?
 - f. Is there evidence of the Holy Spirit at work within me?
2. Perhaps you've been a Christian a long time, but you're not sure that you see much evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in your life right now. It's never too late to begin. Daily invite the Spirit to do the work only He can do in your life.
3. Consider how you want your story to read after you are gone. Write it out. Consider ways you can change course now that will impact your story.