

Transformation: How Does It Happen?

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Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" Romans 12:2 (NIV).

Recently I ran into a woman I had not seen for several weeks. I hardly recognized her. Her hair, usually blonde, had turned completely white. The transformation was dramatic; she looked like a different person. All it took was forty minutes and some bleach!

If only spiritual transformation were that easy. Just read a book, see a counselor, attend a conference, make a fresh commitment, resolve to be different, shed a few tears at an altar, memorize a few verses . . . and, *presto*, out comes a mature, godly Christian.

To the contrary, the experience of many believers looks like this:

- Commit. Fail. Confess.
- Re-commit. Fail again. Confess again.
- Re-re-commit. Fail again. Give up.

After all the struggle and the effort, we tend to want a "quick fix"—a book, a conference, a counselor, an encounter, a miraculous deliverance, a program—something that will be effective, and preferably pain-free. We want God (or someone else) to do something to us for a once-for-all victory so that we won't have to keep wrestling with the same old issues.

In my own walk with God, I have discovered some helpful principles about how spiritual change takes place.

1. Deep, lasting spiritual change is a process.

It rarely happens overnight. It involves training, testing, and time. There are not shortcuts.

We hear of people being dramatically delivered from drug or alcohol addiction, and we may wonder, “Why doesn't God do that for me? Why do I have to struggle with this food addiction; with lust, worry, and fear; with an unbridled tongue?”

Occasionally God does grant instantaneous victory, but more often He leads us through a process that requires obedience, faith, discipline, and time. God is committed to winning the hearts and developing the hearts and developing the character of His people.

2. Spiritual change requires desire.

We need to ask ourselves: Do I really want to change, or am I content to remain as I am? How important is it to me to be like Jesus? What price am I willing to pay to be godly?

Deep within God's children is a desire to please Him. That desire is nurtured by prayer (acknowledging our dependence on Him) and by meditation on Christ, the object of our desire.

As I read the Scripture and gaze on the Lord Jesus, I long to be like Him—humble, holy, compassionate, surrendered to the will of God, sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit.

When our desire to be holy is greater than our willingness to stay where we are, we have taken a big step toward spiritual transformation.

3. Spiritual change flows out of an intimate relationship with Jesus.

We want to please those we love, and we are grieved when we offend them. The more we love Jesus, the greater will be our motivation to obey Him and to make the choices that please Him.

The ultimate issue in life is what or whom we worship. The process of true change takes place as we are weaned from our love and worship of self, pleasure, and this world; and our hearts become wholly devoted to Christ.

4. Spiritual change requires discipline.

I can remember as a college student sitting for hours on end in tiny, windowless practice rooms, playing the same piece of music again and again. I knew that I never would reach my goal—to make beautiful music—without that rigorous discipline.

Discipline for the purpose of godliness is not the same as self-effort. Rather, it means consciously cooperating with the Holy Spirit—yielding to Him so that He can conform us to the image of Christ.

The problem is, we want the outcome without the process. We want victory without the warfare.

Praying and hoping for spiritual change is futile if we sit glued to a television set or neglect the means that God has provided for our growth in grace. Bible study, meditation, worship, prayer, fasting, accountability, and obedience are disciplines that produce a harvest of righteousness in our lives.

5. Spiritual change is brought about by the Holy Spirit, as we exercise faith and obedience.

So which is it? Does God do the work, or do we? According to Scripture, the answer is “yes”; “Work out your salvation . . . for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil. 2:12-13).

True spiritual change is initiated and enabled by the indwelling Spirit of God; it is all of grace, which we receive as we persevere in humility, obedience, and faith.

6. Spiritual change is possible (and assured) because of the new life we received when we were born again.

According to God's Word, at the point of regeneration we became “a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17). For believers, holy living is not a matter of trying harder, but rather of walking in the reality of a supernatural change that already has taken place.

Sanctification is the process by which the change of God has wrought within us is worked out in our daily experience, as we “are being transformed into [Christ's] likeness” (2 Cor. 3:18). It is a lifelong—and sometimes painful—process. But we have the confidence that one day the transformation will be complete, and “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).