

# The God Who Transforms

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West Side Church of Christ  
Searcy, Arkansas  
Nathan Guy

## Scripture Reading

*“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed (1 Corinthians 15:51 NIV)*

*“Anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life emerges! Look at it! All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other. God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins.” (2 Cor 5:17-19 MSG)*

## ***METAMORPHOSIS***

Gather round, kids. I want to tell you the story of how the butterfly grows. There are 4 stages, you see. Each of them important. And for some, it only takes a month. For others, it can take a whole year.

The first stage is the egg. They are not easy to find, but if you look very carefully on the leaves of plants, you might find one or a cluster of eggs. Not all eggs look the same. Some are round like a circle; others are more oval. Some are yellow; some are green. Eggs can be ribbed, or bumpy, or smooth. But it's what's in the egg that really matters. You see, in the egg a caterpillar grows, and grows, and grows.

When the Caterpillar is too big for the egg, the egg hatches, and out comes the caterpillar. It's very hungry, so it starts to eat the leaf its standing on right away. The food makes it bigger and stronger, so big that it's too big for its own coat. So, the caterpillar sheds its coat of skin, and does it several times. This is the larva stage.

But when it grows as big as it can, it puts on an overcoat called a Pupa—so big you can't see what's happening inside. This is the Chrysalis stage. It looks like the caterpillar is just taking a nap or something. But what's happening inside that big overcoat is where the magic happens. You see, the caterpillar is short, stubby, and wingless. But in that overcoat, everything about that caterpillar changes. You wouldn't believe it if I didn't

tell you. But that short stubby crawly work-looking thing transforms into a beautiful, flying, multi-colored, gorgeous butterfly.<sup>1</sup>

We call it “metamorphosis.” Do you know how the dictionary defines that word? It means “a change of the form or nature of a thing or person into a completely different one, by natural or supernatural means.”

Did you hear what that phrase could mean: “a change of the nature of a person into a completely different person, by supernatural means.”

It’s right there in black and white in 2 Corinthians 5:17. Listen to how Eugene Peterson in his beautiful paraphrase *The Message* translates this powerful line from Paul: “Anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life emerges! Look at it! All this comes from God” (2 Corinthians 5:17-18).

Do you believe that? Do you believe when you look in the spiritual mirror, and see the warts, bumps, and bruises, the broken parts of you, the well-tread, worn-out parts... do you believe that you can sprout wings like eagles? That you can be renewed from within, so much so, that not only others but even you will see nothing but complete transformation when you look at yourself? That you can be better, whole, fulfilled, rejuvenated, completely healed, and at peace with everyone and everything, so that your worst experiences and darkest memories will seem like a distant memory of a former life. Do you believe that?

### ***HARD TO BELIEVE***

It's ok if you don't. Mary and Martha didn't. Not at first. Their brother had just died. They had faith in Jesus. But they just buried their brother. That was real. “Lord,” Martha says to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” The damage is done,” she says. “You could have stopped it.”

But then she offers this ray of hope: “But I know,” says Martha, “I know that *even now* God will give you whatever you ask.”

And Jesus talks metamorphosis. “Your dead brother. Your lifeless brother. Sitting there in graveclothes around him like a cocoon. I can do a work and a wonder in there. Against all odds, your brother will rise again. You see, I AM the resurrection and the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bringbutterfliesback.org/butterfly-life-cycle/#:~:text=They%20Undergo%20Remarkable%20Changes,month%20to%20a%20whole%20year.>

life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die...Do you believe this?” (John 11:21-26).

It’s normal to be cynical. We live in a world where things seem to be set in stone. I did what I did. And I am what I am. I’ve made my bet. I know my lot in life. And its never going to change. After all, “can a leopard change its spots?” (Jer 13:23).

Yes. Yes it can.

### ***HOW DO YOU CHANGE A PERSON? DEATH & RESURRECTION***

Hollywood doesn’t always get it right. Let’s face it. It rarely gets it right. But in 1991, a young JJ Abrams wrote a screenplay for a movie starring Harrison Ford where the question is asked, “how do you change a bad person into a good person?” It was called *Regarding Henry*.

Henry is an aggressive & successful New York Lawyer living the fast-paced, fast-track, ladder-climbing life of someone in the prime of their life, chasing money and power. He is also self-centered, callous, manipulative, and thoroughly a moral. He has nothing encouraging to say to movers, salespeople, or even his own child (all of whom are beneath him).

Until one night when he goes out to get milk from the corner drug store and interrupts a robbery in progress. Spooked, the robber shoots Henry in the chest and in the head, sending him straight to the hospital where his family is unsure if he will even survive.

Henry lives. But it’s not the same Henry. The bullet to the brain caused severe damage. Henry awakens to find himself unable to walk, or talk, or even remember his name. He doesn’t recognize his wife or his daughter. With the help of Bradley, a jovial physical therapist, Henry begins the long road to recovery. In more ways than one. Henry forgets how to be a bad man and learns how to be a good one.

He learns to walk again. He learns to talk again. And he learns to love again. The workaholic who was always too busy to even talk to (much less, spend time with) his daughter, now lives at home most of the day. His daughter teaches him how to tie his shoes. She explains to him why, when baking, you have to make several small cookies, not one big cookie. “I tried that,” she says to him; “it didn’t work.” The husband who (we find out later) had been non-present and unfaithful is re-enchanted with his wife and falls in love with her. And the former attorney rifles through his old papers only to

discover how often he broke the rules to wrongfully win cases, even finds time to correct his own mistake and reward a family that deserved justice.

The point of the movie is this: “It’s never too late to change a person.”<sup>2</sup> But you have to kill ‘em first! Then, start all over.

That’s Jesus’ prescription, too. In John 3, A Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus comes to Jesus secretly by night. He has a burning interest in Jesus and wants to meet him, but he wants to encounter him away from the crowds of onlookers, away from the light of day. And Jesus says to him, “Truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Born again. Starting life a second time. From the beginning. New life, with a new perspective, and a new identity. You can’t add this to your existing life. Something nice and neat to put in a box on your mantle, never to be seen by the people in your life, only to be enjoyed by you in the peaceful quiet of your home. No. It demands everything from you. To be born again means to end this life and start a new one.

If that seems scary or outlandish, may I remind you that every one of us has an appointment with death. It’s a bit like the repairman. Death will come to visit us “sometime between the hours of now and 60 years from now.” But make no mistake—unless the Lord returns first, we will all make our appointment.

Death is inevitable. But Jesus says you can choose when and where. And even better, you can choose what you will experience on the other side.

We know, don’t we, that at the end of time, there will be a resurrection. We are coming up out of our graves. Only we won’t have to worry about all those parts of us that are less than they could be, those memories that tear us down, those parts of ourselves that don’t work right or don’t look right. Because God has metamorphosis in mind.

“I tell you, brothers and sisters” writes Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, beginning in verse 50: “I tell you a mystery! (it may be the case, if the Lord comes back, that) We will not all die, but (here is something that applies to every one of us:) we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then

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<sup>2</sup> Frederic & Mary Ann Brussat, “Regarding Henry.” Film Review. Spirituality & Practice. <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/reviews/view/5027/regarding-henry>

then saying that is written will be fulfilled: Death has been swallowed up in victory!” (1 Cor 15:50-54 NRSV).

When the Lord comes back, we will be changed. I believe that, and you do too. But standing there in the shadow of her brother’s grave, Martha needed to hear of a more immediate hope. In their short exchange, Jesus assures Martha that “even now” change can happen. Because she is not just standing in the valley of the shadow of death; she is standing in the shadow of Jesus, the same Jesus who calls into existence things that were not and now are; the same God who uphold the world by his power, who spoke life into existence, and shaped humanity with his own hands before breathing into his nostrils the breath of life. The same Jesus who now lives in all who call upon him as Lord and Savior; all who have accepted the Spirit of God and the forgiveness of sins in their surrender. All who died to themselves and buried their bodies in the baptismal grave. All who have chosen to die. Even now, says Jesus, I can bring life from the dead. Real life. Abundant life. And for the first time, you can begin to truly live. Jesus actually, truly, really, raised a dead man back to life again on that day (graveclothes and all); but to you and me he is echoing something deeper and better. Because physically dead men raised to physical life again will still die again. But I’m talking about eternal life—as Jesus says, “those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

As someone once said, “Everyone who dies once will live once. But everyone who dies twice will live twice.”

Have you ever wondered why, when someone wants to begin their walk with Jesus, we practice baptism? It’s an announcement—in front of the crowd, in the light of day—that this person is dying to their old way of life. All those things that you think can never be erased, are rubbed off and washed away; they stay dead and buried. But up from the grave rises a new you. With a new identity. A new birth. You come out of the water, but you are raised full of the Spirit. And you are raised beautiful. Ready to fly. Metamorphosis.

Can you imagine if your life could change, starting now? You have to believe.

### ***YOUR LIFE IS NOT FUTILE***

In his book, *Six Hours One Friday*, Max Lucado offers three poignant lines that have been meaningful to me, and I want to share them with you.

The first is, your life is not futile. Your life can be meaningful. The first missionary mentioned in the gospel of Mark must be someone special. The first person Jesus taps

to go home and tell your friends and family what the Lord has done for you. In a book full of Jesus telling people "don't utter a word," this man is told "spread the news." Chosen by Jesus. What a mission, what a calling, what a life! But you see, it was a mission, a calling, given to him on the very first day of his brand new life. The only "life" worth mentioning really. Because his former life was the "demon-possessed" man, full of so many demons they called themselves "Legion." He lived among the dead, in the cemetery caves. And that was fitting. That is no kind of life. Can you imagine what his former friends and family thought? "This is now his lot in life. We might as well just forget about him." Can you imagine what he must have thought in those few moments when the demons allowed him to see just what his so-called life had become? "This is my lot in life? This is me? And it will never change." Until he stood in the shadow of Jesus Christ. Who said, "not on your life." On mine. Here's a brand new one.

Your life is not meaningless, I don't care what others have told you, or what you have told yourself. The man with no name is given a mission: tell your story. What just happened to you IS your story. It's meaningful. I've given you meaning.

### ***YOUR FAILURES ARE NOT FATAL***

Second, your failures are not fatal. If you messed up, I promise you, it doesn't have to be the end of the story. It may be part of your story. But my God can reframe your story.

A few weeks ago, I quickly mentioned in passing one of my favorite notes in the margin of my Bible. It has to do with charcoal. I love a good charcoal fire. When I smell it, so many good memories come flooding my mind. Suddenly, it the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, or I'm playing the final inning of Little League baseball, and coach is getting the celebration burgers ready just outside the dugout. Or I am with my friends on the back deck by the pool, about to enjoy the perfect summer day. Charcoal has that pungent aroma that fills your nostrils and makes you remember.

The word translated "charcoal fire" is only used twice in the whole New Testament, and both are in the gospel of John. The first time we see this word is in John 18:18. Jesus is in the courtyard with the high priest. John has gone in with him (as a loyal disciple should). But Peter is standing outside. He's outside, stand next to the police that arrested Jesus, while denying Jesus. And the text says he was warming his hands by a "charcoal fire." John switches scenes to tell you of Jesus being questioned. And when he gets back to the Peter story in verse 25, there is Peter still warming himself by the fire. And two more times, Peter denies Christ. The rooster crows.

John doesn't tell us the immediate aftermath. We have to go to the other gospels to find out that Jesus turns and looks at Peter. And Peter runs away and weeps bitterly. Don't you know that for the rest of his life, every time he passes by a charcoal fire, and that pungent aroma fills his nostrils, he is going to remember the worst day of his life, and his three memorable denials.

But Jesus is the business of reframing our stories. Three chapters later, Peter has gone fishing. He's not alone. But he becomes the central focus of the story. Because when he hears that the risen Jesus is on the shore, he jumps in the lake and swims to shore. And there is Jesus, and according to John 21:9, Jesus is cooking fish on a “charcoal fire.” And as that pungent aroma fills his nostrils, Jesus turns this into the best day of his life, as he gives him the opportunity to turn those three denials into three affirmations, and then gives him a mission in life: to go and feed my sheep.

By the time you get to 2 Peter (2:1), the aged Peter is described as saying “can you believe these false prophets that are out there and are coming to you. Why...they even deny the Lord that bought them!” Yeah, Peter. Can you imagine someone who would do such a thing? No—he really can't. That was a different person in a different life. God reframes our stories.

### ***YOUR FUTURE IS NOT FINAL***

Third, your future is not final. Not yet. Your reputation, your course, is not set in stone.

All we know is that he was a thief. Another man with no name. Only a sinister occupation. And not only that, we know him by his dastardly deeds and the terrible way he died. We know him as “the thief on the cross.” He wasn't the only bandit on a cross that day. One of them hung there deriding Jesus until his dying breath: “Are you not the Messiah? If you are, save yourself and us!” Luke tells us that the other bandit—the one whose title we remember—told the first one to pipe down. “Don't you fear God?” he said. “We have been condemned justly, and we are getting what we deserve for what we have done. But this man—he did nothing wrong.” Then he turned his head to face Jesus and said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

We all know how this ends, he's thinking to himself. This is my story. This is my song. It's a sad one, and there are no more verses to be written. Not for me. But there's much more to say about you, Jesus. Do you think, I mean, would it even be possible, that when you get all the glory that is awaiting you, you will remember me?”

Jesus turns to the thief on the cross and says “this is not the end of your story. There's a rousing chorus and a beautiful verse that is waiting to be written. It won't be long

now. But truly I tell you, today—this very day—you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:39-43).

Your life is not futile. Your failures are not fatal. And your future is not final.

Paul Harvey tells the story of Edwin Thomas, a great Shakespearian actor. He started acting at the age of 15. In 1852, Edwin met phenomenal world-wide success, most people recognized him on the street, and his was a household name. He had two brothers who were also actors. The three of them banded together and starred in a performance of *Julius Caesar* in 1863. His brother John took the role of Brutus. Which was frighteningly ironic. Because 2 years later, on April 15, 1865, brother John shot and killed a President.

There were 2 murders that night. Abraham Lincoln lost his life; but Edwin Thomas Booth lost his name, reputation, and career.

But he carried a letter in his pocket to his dying day. A letter of thanks for an act of great, heroic courage.

You see, years later, the actor was waiting to board a train in Jersey City. When he noticed a well-dressed young man fall between the station platform and the moving train. Acting quickly, Edwin locked one leg around the railing, and, hanging on with one hand, he grabbed the boy by the collar with other hand, and pulled him to safety. Some people in the crowd recognized him as that former actor with the disgraced name, Edwin Booth. Edwin and the boy shook hands, and he left the station. Edwin had no idea who that boy was.

A few weeks later, Edwin got a letter from President Ulysses S. Grant. The man with no good name got a letter from the President of the United States. A letter he kept in his pocket til his dying day. A letter thanking him for his heroic courage that spared the life of Robert Todd Lincoln, the son of a slain President.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever you’ve done, whatever you’ve experience, whatever other’s have told you or you’ve told yourself. No matter how far you think you’ve gone, no matter what hour you think it is, no matter how much water has gone under the bridge, it can be changed. You can find meaning and purpose. You can find hope and a future. Your story can be different. It can be better. It can be changed. God promises so.

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from Paul Harvey, *The Rest of the Story*.



But it starts with death. Give up your life and let him give you a brand new one. By his Spirit, in Christ who is our chrysalis, he will transform you. Imagine what you can become.

He changes things. He changes things for the better. And he can change you. Our good and beautiful God is in the business of making good and beautiful you's.