

THE WONDER OF TRANSFORMATION

The wonder of transformation is that God knew we would fall, need transformation and he provided those means. Friends, in addressing this topic I felt that God was telling me to help people find the wonder of transformation in their own lives. That's my subject for today. I did it at short notice so I apologise if it's rough!

But let's take a step back and start with Grace – it's wonderful to know that our salvation is nothing to do with us! As Paul puts it in Ephesians 2, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast." So, once you put your trust in Jesus, Christian life is easy? Isn't it? Not.

Well, let me remind you about two well-known characters, Peter and Paul. Peter was a lost man of the fallen world; he knew he was a sinner. When he realised who Jesus was, he said "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8). Then we know, he put his trust in Jesus and became his leading disciple. His redemption was sure; it was God's grace. Jesus said on Peter the rock he would build his church. But what happened then? Jesus was arrested and Peter denied him, after promising he would go with Jesus to his death. Even after receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter in Antioch withdrew to his Jewish traditions, refusing to eat with Gentiles, incurring Paul's rebuke.

Paul too, although he believed he was doing God's work was a "slave to sin" in his own words when he pushed his ambition to be a leading rabbi, and zealously persecuted Jesus' followers. Then came the road to Damascus, and his life was turned around. His redemption was sure; it was God's grace. But what do we read in Romans 7 but of Paul's inner struggles with sin. "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing." I think he felt particularly he was someone who coveted things that others had and wished he could be rid of that sin.

These heroes of the faith show us the Christian life is anything but easy. There is severe turbulence on the flight to the abundant life. Here's a diagram that can help us make sense of it. It shows indeed that without Christ things are hopeless, we are all slaves to sin. Then comes conversion and we cross the line to salvation – only through God's grace. As Peter did when he put his trust in Jesus, and when Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus. Thereafter there is the process we call sanctification. This is quite a hopeful diagram; it shows it all going up to holiness, with just a few bumps. But it could equally flatline or even regress. Although we can be sure of our salvation, in other words that we will go to be with Jesus at our death, we could be missing a lot! We are saved by grace but we may not always be moving towards God, by becoming more like Jesus.

The Freedom in Christ course has a lot to say on this. Those of you who have been on it will know that the basic premise is that when we become Christians we have a lot of spiritual baggage that has accumulated over our lives. And although salvation changes our nature, complete transformation of our lives may take a bit longer. And the course tries to show us how we can achieve Freedom in Christ by taking hold of our new status as adopted children of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit. Then we can overcome the three main obstacles to our sanctification, the world, the flesh and the devil. The fallen world tries to tempt us to conform to its way of doing things. Or we become self-reliant, what Paul calls relying on the flesh, which in us has been corrupted by rebellion against God. Satan is always setting traps for the unwary, tempting and accusing. Sin crouches at the door, as it did for Cain, and if we let it in it devours us, to use the words of James and Peter. And yet in Christ we can resist

these traps and our lives can be transformed.

There are a lot of graduates of Freedom in Christ here today and when we have a time for testimony at the end of the session it would be great to hear from you. But what I want to focus on today is another way of thinking about how things can go wrong in our Christian lives, but how also we can get back on the path and into God's presence. I believe for some of you it could be transformational!

We know that mankind was designed to bask in God's presence. Genesis tells us a lot about this. We are not a mistake. God said "let us make man in our own image" it was a decision of the whole Trinity. And God breathed life into man, even as we are born again as Christians when we put our trust in Jesus. Genesis tells us light, water, earth, vegetation and living creatures were all there before man, for man's use and God planted a garden as a special place to delight Adam. Adam also had a task to take care of the garden, so work was sanctified before the fall. God delegated authority to Adam to name living creatures and gave him Eve as company. In God's presence Adam and Eve felt no shame or guilt just innocence and transparency. And God would appear towards the end of the day for conversation.

Adam and Eve were thus in the presence of God's love, trusting him. They belonged, they had value, meaning and purpose for their lives. It's widely understood both in the secular and the church, for example in the teaching of Selwyn Hughes, that people are hard wired with goals of self worth, significance and security. Self worth we know. Significance is having a purpose in life. Security is love and acceptance. But God provided for them all in Eden. The Jewish word "shalom" described the situation. A lovely image to describe that state is like being under a tropical waterfall of God's love that brings all we need to us – self worth, significance and security - see these pictures. We were designed to be there too.

But we know what happened to Adam and Eve. The serpent, the devil convinced them that God was hiding something from them, so they came to doubt God's goodness. They moved out to sin and independence, playing God themselves. Out of the waterfall of God's love, they were banished into a fallen, decaying world. And what did they find there? Pain. Pain from being alone, having isolated, having meaningless lives, of no value or worth, desperately insecure. And that's how humanity continued, and we still feel it now, at times even as Christians. And yet God wants man back "where are you Adam?" is his own cry of pain. Like the Prodigal Father waited for the Prodigal Son, God is waiting for us to return to him.

And that of course is the story of the cross. God's rescue plan that would lead us back into the waterfall of his love. When Jesus raised from the dead the son of the widow of Nain, it was said "God has come to rescue his people". And this rescue is what should happen to us when we become Christians. But why does it often not feel like that? We know where we as Christians ought to be - in the waterfall – why are we not always there?

I think the answer is that we try to get self worth, significance and security from somewhere else. And here is a crucial verse, Jeremiah 2:13 "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." We put something else than God at the center of our lives. What's your cistern? For Paul for example I think it remained for some time after his conversion his prowess as a Rabbi – "a Pharisee, faultless in legal righteousness".

And friends, those things don't disappear straight away when we are saved – hence Paul's cry of pain in Romans 7. Nor does it happen without our effort. Yes, sanctification is partly a matter of God's intervention, 1 Thessalonians 5:23 says "may God himself, the God of peace,

sanctify you through and through”. But equally there are passages like Romans 8:13 “if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live”. It’s not the Holy Spirit who has to put to death the deeds of the flesh, but Christians themselves! Or as Paul says to the Philippians “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in you...” Certainly, there’s an element of cooperation – we are empowered by God but we also need to act.

So what’s the way back to the waterfall of God’s presence? I believe it’s finding out what our cisterns are and why we are drinking muddy drops from them in the first place. Knowledge is power. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, with such knowledge, we can repent and God can transform our lives. Back under the waterfall.

Let me show you a quick sketch, giving credit to Angie Coombes who teaches at Waverley Abbey and originated the parable. This is everyman, out in the world, away from God’s presence. There are four things to think about, thinking, feelings, resultant choices and behaviour. Feelings. Out there in the fallen world, even as Christians, we have feelings that have been attached to the incidents of our lives. Like being bullied as child, for example, which generates bad feelings. We tend to value positive feelings and suppress negative ones, but that’s draining. We run out of energy doing the suppression, leading to hopelessness and depression. Or self-destructive behaviour of teenagers. Or illness and bitterness in adults. So what we need to do first is name the feelings. And there are three key areas. If our goals in life are blocked, we are likely to get angry and depressed. If they are uncertain, we get anxious. And if they are unreachable, then we feel guilt (about what we do) and shame (for who we are).

Then we need to realize the thinking processes we have adopted. Romans 12:2 says “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is” Again, events from our past can lead us into beliefs, that may not be true, and consequent emotions. Maybe a man is angry because once his mother, an alcoholic, was drunk on his birthday. So he adopted the belief he was not loved, and a feeling of anger. Only recognizing the lie – in this case that the mother did love him but was vulnerable herself, can get the mind sorted and discerning God’s will for our lives. Satan, the father of lies, will try to block that process, which may be a protracted one.

Choices. When we are out of God’s presence we adopt defense mechanisms to protect ourselves, it might be shyness, withdrawal from company, becoming a bully or being a clown “the life and soul of the party”. Then, we choose things that make us feel good, be they jobs, status, alcohol, our children, shopping. Our performance, our perfectionism, the cleanliness of our house. So we put them at the center of our lives, they dominate our behaviour. And there we are, we have ended up with a misplaced dependency on something that is not God, a leaky cistern in fact. This is what Jeremiah meant in 2:13.

The world, the flesh and the devil fit into this pattern all too well. The world is tempting us to conform to its norms, where people do indeed choose to put their careers, their performance, and the admiration of others at the center of their lives. The flesh is allowing feelings and misplaced thoughts to gnaw away at us, leading us to those choices. And Satan loves to turn us away from God, with lies, threats and accusations! Think of his promise, do this, buy this, wear this, and you’ll feel really good about yourself. Not.

But transformation is possible, thank God! We can recognize that what we have chosen is not of God. We can repent of that, and lay it at the foot of the cross. Trust him for our security,

self worth and significance. Fight against the flesh, the world and the devil, claiming our freedom in Christ. Then we can return to the waterfall of his presence, progressing in our sanctification.

Well, thanks Philip you may say, Now I don't need to pay the fee for a Waverley Abbey biblical counseling course. What you said is a bit dry though! How do I get hold of it? I agree, and I am going to give you a little glimpse of how I understand my life using the model, as a kind of example. I pray it will help you look at your life with a hope of being transformed.

I believe one key background event for me was my father dying when I was nearly four, after he'd played a big role in my upbringing. Another is that I wasn't a planned pregnancy and that was unwelcome to my parents, although I was very much loved once I was born. I believe these gave rise to a number of suppressed emotions that a little boy bottled up at the time and remained with me till I became a Christian.

Recognizing those feelings, remember, is half the battle! I think my dominant emotion for much of my life has been anxiety. If someone core to your life can disappear like that, you get anxious. You are uncertain how to find security, self worth and significance. But another emotion I used to feel a great deal is fear of rejection even by those I trust. I think I felt this emotion because my mother actually told me I wasn't wanted initially.

What sort of thinking, what lies, could have led to these feelings? From my father's death, I probably concluded that people I trust will let me down and I will feel abandoned and betrayed. I didn't think too much about God before I was a Christian, so I can't say whether I trusted him or not. The only way to feel secure was to rely on myself since I could trust myself. Remember, we are thinking of the emotions and thinking of a little boy but still present as I grew up.

These feelings and thoughts led on to choices that dominated my life before I became a Christian. I adopted defence mechanisms like, always expect to be rejected, or unsuccessful in advance, and then you can't be disappointed. Don't expose feelings in relationships given the risk of rejection. And be wary of challenging people for the same reason. Choosing self reliance as well. I avoided facing the feelings by always being busy.

I also chose things to feel good about. Especially, to achieve academic success, to build up my self-worth. I was pretty good at that, right from my objective as a child to get better exam results than my brothers, through to publishing articles and lecturing at conferences as an economist which made me feel significant.

And so I ended up with behaviour; leading to goals which were the wrong sources, the leaky cisterns. My Economics work was a source of value and worth, or even meaning or purpose in my life. I sought a sense of love and belonging from being liked by the people I knew. And I got security from my income and savings that I earned via my job, money that I held on to tightly. See how in difficulty I used my strength instead of God's, since I didn't know him in my life.

But for me too, thank God, there was a way out that I found when I became a Christian. And that was to decide to trust in God. Taking that risk. Repenting of using the wrong wells. Being willing to surrender who I was and what I had to conform myself with Jesus. Evidence of God's trustworthiness helped me to take that risk. That he had provided for my finances. When I was converted my deliverance from Satan's clutches and strongholds. And God's direction in my life into ministry since then has confirmed how trustworthy he is!

Getting under the waterfall has meant a lot to me – I have changed tremendously in the last 12 years, much to the amazement of my old university friends! But transformation of my life is still a process, as for any other Christian. Things that I couldn't do before I can do now. I have a deeper love for my family, overcoming self-love. My Economics and ministry I can see now more as a joyful response to God's love, not a vital source of my own self worth. I find time to be with God and not always frantically busy, I love praying. I'm able to steward the resources God has blessed me with for his kingdom. And again, I can see people who reject me sometimes as expressing their own hurts, so I can pity them and try to help them pastorally. Some things never leave us completely, I still feel a pang of rejection and anxiety at some times, as we all do.

So that's how I see the issue of sanctification, using the parable of the waterfall. It helps me to recognise that the transformation in my life has been profound, although there will always be more to do and indeed new things that God brings to mind as needing attention. I hope it strikes some chords for you and will help you identify the cisterns that you might still be taking water from. We all need to remember that the process of sanctification is an ongoing one whereby we are constantly fighting against the flesh, the world and the devil. And Freedom in Christ gives us the tools to overcome them. If you haven't attended a course yet, do go on the next one!

We are now going to have a time for testimony. And Becky has already volunteered to inspire us and start us off. But let me say this. If you have been touched by the waterfall, and my own testimony in the sermon. If you long for God's presence, and you realize that you have been drinking from the wrong wells, don't leave without prayer – the ministry team and Elders would love to pray for you. Or if the difficulty you're struggling with is really deep, you might need Christian counseling. Do talk to Claire, Jean or Karen in that case.