



TRANSFORMATION AS THE HEART OF MINISTRY

BY RYAN BRISTOW

Introduction by Brandon Worsham

This sermon was written and delivered by Ryan Bristow, FOCUS Campus Pastor at the University of North Texas. It was presented at the FOCUS Staff Fall Retreat, August 2024. There was a deep sense among the 50 or so present that it had an inspired tone to it. First, because we have seen true transformation in Ryan's life over the preceding years. Those of us that mentor and work with Ryan know that his own Spirit-produced transformation came about not with a quick before/after reveal, but by the hand of God. Ryan tries with all of his might to practice what he says here. And he is a testimony to the validity of it. Ryan, indeed, is just one of many examples of the transforming power of the gospel, the word of God, prayer, and the community of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit. That sermon, presented here as an article, represents the real and raw thoughts of a sweet, godly, understated, and sometimes melancholy guy, who has drunk deeply from the well of God. And the river of life flows from him. This is worth a thoughtful read.

The Slowness of Change

I've always loved the concept of transformation. Before and after photos draw me in in ways few other things do. Show me a commercial for a receding hairline seemingly magically reversing, a workout program that takes you from dad bod to ectomorph, etc. I'm gonna watch it.

Unfortunately, when it comes to clickbait, few things test my self control more. What does the cast of Dawson's Creek look like now anyways?

It's all over my life. I got this ancient bike to try and fix up; same with this boat someone gave me, or old pieces of furniture. Usually the process itself is more interesting. For example, once the boat was restored, I used it twice and it's been sitting idle since.

My wife and I started renovating our house recently and predictably my Instagram reels started trending towards before and after room remodel videos by

DIYers. I pretty quickly stopped watching those, as they're a special brand of annoying. You see, they'd show the before, then snap their fingers or throw a paint brush at the camera and it jumps to the completed project with them spinning around with their arms out, basking in the glory of it all without a speck of paint or drywall dust on them. Nothing shown from the middle of these projects where you just want to go to sleep and never look at it again, or how no matter how many tape measures you get, you can never find the one you just had on you; Not much of the reality of what it takes to redo a whole room or section of a house.



But I think we're all drawn to this type of stuff to some extent. If you look at our pastoral staff's collective strengths on the "Strengthsfinder" test, the Restorative strength is in a lot of our team's top five strengths. Restorative strength has a lot to do with seeing something that needs to be fixed or changed and trying to get to the "after" of that thing. It's the before and after strength in some ways.

I think beyond all of that though, this draw we feel towards much of this is also indicative of our being image bearers. Genesis starts with us being created in God's image, and being called to steward. Stewards are both maintainers and restorers of their environment or valuables they are asked to look out for. God is certainly portrayed in scripture as a God who is invested in both the before and the after. But unlike the Instagram reels we watch, his route from the before to the after is often much more confounding to us.

Earlier this summer, I kept feeling like the Lord was

drawing my attention to the mystery of what we do through the passage below.

"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." (Mark 4:26-29)

I work with our team of ministers in Denton and this parable resonated with me quite a bit. I was thinking about Denton FOCUS and how so much of the changes there over the last few years have felt so mysterious to me. God let us experience renewal and energizing changes in our ministry, but I feel like our team just got to be a part of something happening; we didn't figure out a formula to get this outcome. While we slept, while we got up, while we scattered seed ... something grew and changed.

On the flip side, I've been thinking about my own life. In the last decade in particular, God has changed things in me I thought wouldn't budge much. I've grown to love doing much of what I used to find so much difficulty in. And yet at the same time, there's also so many areas where I sit and pray and ask God, sometimes from a place of heartbreak, why it hasn't changed. Or, why does it seem like it has gotten worse? Why am I still so quick to frustration with my wife? Why am I so fast to dismiss and reduce some people when I hit a wall with them? Why am I avoidant or distant again in the times where what's most needed is to pull people closer?

Sometimes it feels like the things I'm most desperate for God to change and change quickly seem the most stuck.

I think about this a lot with my work, less on the general side of Denton FOCUS but with the particular people I meet with. At the end of the day, what really changes people? What truly moves them onto God's agenda? Is it their self-reflection time with God? Is it the conversations, the content we go over,

the experience of living around people, and then changing by osmosis? Why is change often so slow, but sometimes really fast? I've been thinking a lot about these questions. I can meet with someone every week and talk about all kinds of stuff, but as is often the case for myself, there's still this constant need to address some thing that we have before.

I've thought a lot about this when it comes to prayer. Eugene Peterson in his book *A Contemplative Pastor* has this passage that has long stuck with me where he says:

“My primary educational task as a pastor was to teach people to pray. I did not abandon, and will not abandon, the task of teaching about the faith, teaching the content of the gospel, the historical background of biblical writings, the history of God’s people. ...The more I worked with people at or near the centers of their lives where God and the human, faith and the absurd, love and indifference were tangled in daily traffic jams, the less it seemed that the way I had been going about teaching made much difference, and the more that teaching them to pray did.”

It's not unusual to discover that after a few meetings with someone, they basically don't believe in prayer. Like sure, if you ask them, they could tell you what we're supposed to think about talking to God. But in reality, God was just about the last person they might turn to when addressing something going on in their life.

Usually when I encounter this, it feels like a roadblock that must be dealt with before we can move on. We can talk about other things, but it can all quickly turn into self-help if you're not understanding the Lord's role in it. It's like the way of Jesus without the relational lordship of knowing him in that way. If we would just talk to God about stuff half as much as we do with our mom, girlfriend/boyfriend, or best friend, we would have an insanely active prayer life. But boyfriend/girlfriend, best friend, parent... they're often affirmation and instant gratification of intimacy. With God on the other hand, what's the shortcut to feeling how he feels towards us? How do we feel intimate and close with a being so mysterious?

I relate to this struggle.

As I sat across from one such student recently, I had hoped that at least by the end of the first semester after multiple conversations and challenges on this, there might be significant movement. We talked about it, sermons were preached about it, leader meeting devotionals covered it... surely all this scattering would result in a fast harvest that I could put the sickle to and move on to other goals, right?

Not really. It was going to be much longer before I began to see much in the way of change. Often these things are not a constantly ascending path, but the trajectory looks much more like a mountain range with heights and dips and plateaus. It was the better part of a year before the conversation began to shift and the student's prayer life became a more consistent part of their week. Honestly, if that's a crossroads type of moment in their faith where prayer becomes a more prominent part, then that's a year well spent.

But I realize as I keep thinking about it that I'm still not sure how this change happens. What do I do when I've had multiple conversations and yet the needle feels stuck? I'm sure my mentors have had similar experiences with me. It's hard not to feel like you're spinning your wheels when you are in this place with someone. Or often, even more close to home, is when you're here yourself.

Is it a knowledge/learning problem? I'm not so sure, because often knowledge has been acquired. Is it experiences that change us? But what about when experiences have happened without the needle moving? Over and over. For instance, how many times have I experienced the devastation of my selfishness? I've seen the effects on the faces of people I love, yet still with that knowledge and that experience, again I am selfish. Where is the transformation in myself?

Romans 7 explores this experience, notably in verses 15-24. Read the full section for the way that Paul intertwines ideas of flesh and law into this, but below is a very relatable excerpt:

“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.” (Romans 7:15;18-19)

Our culture lacks any kind of coherent, realistic sense of what is required for transformation. Instagram reels reinforce instant gratification and portray ideals being achieved with a snap, a jump up and down, or a thrown paintbrush.

We also tend to overemphasize education and acquiring data. Don't get me wrong, education and data can be great. My top strength on the Strengthsfinder test is “Learner,” so if anyone is predisposed to put a lot of stock in that stuff it's me. But the humanist and political answer for how to get people to change is to educate them. If we could just educate people enough they wouldn't be so... what? Hateful? Selfish? Greedy? Racist? Poor? It wins some arguments and mobilizes some people. But if we take a longer look, that idea has more than enough holes to feel absurd sometimes.

The horrors of the World Wars of the past century were not carried out by people because they were uneducated. In fact, the seeds that birthed Nazism, the eugenics movement, and South African Apartheid were propagated by people with some of the highest education levels of their time and place. In the end, we have to reckon with the reality that education can pass along information, but information is shaped and molded and utilized for all kinds of changes for the better, the worse, or for inertia.

I could go on. The self-help sector of the publishing industry and self-actualization messaging has exploded in the last few decades. All of it tugs on this desire within us to see and experience real change.

But if the mechanism for transformation is actually God's love through his Holy Spirit, it

should be little surprise to us that we end up feeling discouraged, confused, and generally unmotivated by expecting transformation to come through all of the other mechanisms offered to us.

What self-help and education models miss is that willpower, effort, and control only get you so far. They do have some potential; otherwise no one would ever be able to espouse self-help methods for very long. But they're inadequate in their capacity to produce lasting change because they're limited by our human finiteness and our human sin.

All of this to say, I think there are a lot of confusing and distracting ideas around change in our day that work their way into our hearts and lead to us being in places where we either aren't looking for transformation in ourselves and in others, or we're cynical about the likelihood of it taking place. Which leads me to my main point: Transformation asks of us sustained vulnerability and humility.

The Vulnerability and Humility of Trusting God to Transform

There are a lot of things I think about focusing on when it comes to transformation. I think about how we're transformed by mission. Think about how the disciples were sent out by Jesus in Mark 6 before they were “ready.”

Or we could think about how we're transformed by catalysts in our lives: points of pain, stress, and upheaval. Much has been written and said about that. Or how we're



transformed by who we're around. How we're transformed by love. Think of Peter's restoration at the end of John. Grace and love transform us, and so many of us have experienced that and have been changed. It's the love of God working itself out through people and we experience the results of that.

All of those are true, and might be things we could explore and are worth exploring. As I prayed through this topic though, I felt pulled back to this other focus instead.

Recently a fellow pastor shared with a group of our pastors some stories of transformation he'd witnessed throughout his years as a campus minister. One was about a student who would come up to the FOCUS tables on campus time after time and argue and be disruptive towards the students and ministers who were there. Another story was of a student who came into the ministry with so much arrogance that he was unwilling to engage in a Bible study with another student or staff person, and it took years of patient discipleship for this to change.

Yet in both cases, eventually, there was a 180.

The first student shared how in all her times arguing and taking out her frustrations with the church on the members at the booths on campus, not once did she experience anything but love and graciousness in return.

The second student spent time around other students who showed love and patience and persistence in the face of his considerable stubbornness.

Both went on to be ministers in the community who, transformed by love and experiencing God in their respective ways, could then proceed to learn to reflect that same love themselves.

I bring these stories up here because those transformations had a throughline. They seemed to come when a significant wall they had was breached. The hurt of the first student's experience was breached by the love of people she interacted with. The arrogance of the second student when he came in broke down by patient love and care to the point where he was open to the study and relationships in a new way.

When we talk about catalysts or moments of upheaval as times of change, a common thread is that

something in our defenses and guard was broken enough for something to break through, and change often follows.

So my encouragement today is that if we want to see transformation, we should learn to live in this vulnerability and humility; not just in times of upheaval, but in our everyday life and ministry.

But to do this takes a kind of destruction of our protective walls, and our guards must stand down. They're often forced to when we hit those times of upheaval, but what if we endeavored to maintain some level of that disposition during times of relative calm? What I'm picturing for us is that as we strive for this disposition, it would lead us to become a people who live with what seems like foolish expectancy and confidence that God will do transformational things.

After all, this is what is promised to us in scripture. It's all over the narrative of scripture. God is a God of transformation. If you look at 2 Corinthians, Paul is arguing for just that among other things.

"But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:16-18)

And later in chapter 5, a more well-known passage:

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Similarly in Ephesians 4:17-32, the message is, "put off, renew, take on." Put off the old self, renew your mind through the Spirit, and take on the new self who is alive and in the likeness of God.

How about Paul's letter to the Galatians, where the wrong gospel they were believing is to be thrown out

so that the reality of the true Gospel could come in and produce the fruit of the Spirit, which would transform individuals and the community into a very different sort of people altogether. This is what the letter to the Galatians famously builds to.

That's the promise. That is Transformation promised. The question is not whether it is possible or how it happens, but if we are committed to a disposition of expectation. Or do we believe some other gospel? The gospel of self-help, or humanism, or some other thing other than the power of God. What our expectations and hopes are centered on reveal what gospel we actually believe.

So do we believe in these scriptures? Do we believe that God will do what he says he will do? Or are we stuck? Are we jaded, either bored by the pace or discouraged about the likelihood of transformation and so we're not looking for God to do something big? Or maybe we feel stuck personally: we're laser focused on this thing we want changed and we can't see what God does, and then forget who He is? We've lost our hope for it.

This is where the vulnerability part comes in. It takes real, sustained vulnerability and humility to be just as hopeful for God to change some part of me that I've asked him to change over and over. It takes vulnerability and humility to remain just as confident and expectant that God can change the person I'm sitting across from, talking about the same thing we've talked about for months or maybe years.

It's almost logical to get discouraged.

It feels like we need a new book, a new angle, a new method. And maybe sometimes we do... I'm confident that God puts ideas and help in all sorts of people's minds and they share that in books and talks and articles. We can add those tools to our toolkit to sharpen our side of what we do.

But surely God transformed people before the printing press, and I worry sometimes we can get to where we're just jumping from one idea to another to

try to find something transformative rather than starting with this basic premise that no, actually God's love and power alone are still enough to transform. My role is to remain steady, expectant, and vulnerable in the waiting. The timing is on God.

The Work of Trusting God's Timing

That brings me to this whole thing around timing. I think it's the biggest kick to the shin to our attempts at maintaining this disposition of vulnerability and humility. We think about these things so much on a time-frame basis. I don't disparage us for that; I think we mostly can't help it.

With someone I'm ministering to I want change to happen in a few days, or a few weeks if we must wait so long. If it's myself, I want the change to happen yesterday so that I wouldn't have to be embarrassed again for being so broken.



But yet, often that ideal timeline is just not the case. Perhaps that says more about our faulty expectations about how things should be than about if God is good and powerful. It seems to me if something happens within us slowly, that is actually the usual mode of God's transformation on this side of Heaven. (Jesus' healings and miracles that have come after are not contradictory to this, they are interruptions and signposts that point to the new creation.) Beyond our own experience being revealing in this regard, we can see the world he created and we get another data point in this being a reality of God's methods. How long does it take a mountain range to form? Or the

cliché but nonetheless relevant example of the acorn into a mighty, majestic oak tree? It's true that there are things in creation that change quickly, but they're often accompanied by devastation. (Volcanoes, earthquakes, etc.) Perhaps this is instructive to us. Perhaps we're similarly, or even to a greater extent, fragile, and constant fast change would be harmful to us. I'm making a suggestion here, not a claim, but it seems to me that it bears considering.

Regardless, even the "slow" change is a miracle, is it not? A sobering part of Jesus' interactions in the gospels are when the request for signs and wonders (short timeline) by the Pharisees were met with rebuke. (Matt 16:1-4) The problem with their request seemed to be that it sprang from a place of suspicion and testing rather than faith and expectancy. After all, we see elsewhere in the gospels similar requests being met with Jesus' affirmation and often miraculous response. The difference seemed to be this great faith and humble expectancy on the part of the asker. Think of the blind beggar outside of Jericho in Luke 18. What vulnerability it must have taken to beg the power of the almighty when you're an outcast who is routinely ignored even by the non-powerful passing you by day after day. (Not just ignored, but implored to shut up.)

"Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Luke 18:38-41)

But I'm convinced that even the slow change should be met with awe and wonder by us. Is the long change from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26) any less miraculous than the blind seeing from a touch of Jesus' hand full of spit and mud? (John 9) Why? Are both not transformations well beyond the power of any one of us?

We presume a lot when our expectations for transformation are on our timeline and not open to God's. If someone tells me I have to go through something difficult but it's only going to be for a short time and will lead to something better, it's much easier to get on board, and even go into that difficulty with some grit and tenacity. It takes a lot more vulnerability and humility to be committed to

expecting God's transformative work on a completely unknown timeline. God could change this part of me now and that would release some pressure and pain I feel, or God could very well wait until the new heavens and earth when he remakes all that is broken. The question for us is are we driving towards that destination with hope and expectation in the driver's seat, or cynicism and discouragement? Are we disgruntled that the God we purportedly serve isn't serving us as quickly as we might like?

This doesn't change the fact that it often feels foolish of us not to hedge our bets a little when hoping for change and praying for it. This is something I do and see and hear in those around me routinely. But I think that the actual foolishness is not to live with an expectation and hope of transformation all the time, even if we don't have much control over when it will happen; to live in the disposition of someone who's experiencing their walls being broken down and their personal structures of comfort and control tested. Because living that way is actually living in love and faith, acknowledging our finite experience of time and of God.

1 Corinthians 13 says *love always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres* (13:7). So are you foolish to always trust that God will do the transformation he promised? Are you foolish to persevere in faith and expectation of change despite people telling you or your mind telling you it's never gonna happen?

It doesn't say love always protects itself. It doesn't say love tempers its hope so it won't be let down. It says love always trusts, always hopes.

It brings me back to the sower in Mark 4. He doesn't do *nothing*. He's not resigned to this attitude of, "Well I don't know when this work will produce results so I guess I won't scatter seed," and he's also not just sitting on the porch with this attitude of, "Well it's all a mystery, but God's change is God's deal so I'll just wait for it to happen."

Instead, he goes out in faith. He scatters, sleeps, wakes, and does his deal all with expectation, despite

the mystery very real toil and frustration of planting and farming.

I think we can reasonably expect based on what we see in the narrative of scripture that some of the transformation in ourselves, others, and our world won't happen in time for us to see it, or at least see as much of it as we want to. I think of the prophets in exile preaching to a despondent people of God and struggling with their own will to keep going. I shudder to think of what my anemic and time conditioned expectations as a modern Christian would have felt like if I were in their shoes.

Or think of the famous hall of faith passage in Hebrews 11. The passage starts off:

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” (11:1-3)

Then it begins this list of those who walked in this expectance: Enoch, then Noah, then Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and on and on.

Finally, Hebrews 11:13-16 says:

“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. “People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had the opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”

I think we should acknowledge that a part of our hope for transformation will remain eschatological (unrealized until new Heavens/Earth) and that's okay. That shouldn't lead us to a place of distant hope or disengaged expectation. After all, that's a part of the promise. It is then that we're told that God will be “all

in all” (1 Cor. 15:28) Until then, *we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.* (1 Cor. 13:12) Again that is the vulnerability here. It's much harder to hope for something that comes at the end, it rails against our conditioning of instant gratification. But it is the way we must take as faithful believers.

At the same time, there is a part of our expectation that I believe gets to be met with a much shorter timeline. If you want to be reminded of the very real transformations that God will do before the New Heavens and Earth, go read the book of Acts. Right? The Lord added to their number daily, preaching led to repentance, and transformed communities sprung up all over the place across the New Testament. We get to be on mission now, and God will do miracles now. He will change your heart, the heart of that person you're reaching out to, our world, now. He is doing that.

And that is the tension we have to live in. We should be faithful and look foolish by being confident that wild things can and will be done by God, and yet humble enough to accept that this is all God's deal. I can't predict when or how. We must allow both of these realities of the promises in scripture to push back against discouragement, or jadedness, complacency, or whatever is standing in the way of the disposition of expectation that God transformed then and transforms now.

The reality is you're going to look foolish either way. You can choose to look foolish now when a cynical world tells you you're crazy to expect God to do these things and even in your heart you wonder and doubt what he will do. Or you can look foolish later if you tied your hope to self help, willpower, or other suggestions around you on how to transform and eventually in the end the hollowness of all of that will be shown for what it is and you'll be left wishing you had been more of a part of what God was doing and his way and time of doing it.

So practically, let's let this lead us to fervent prayers. Pray prayers of hope, vulnerability, and expectation for God to work.

In Luke 11 there's that parable of the neighbor coming at midnight to ask for loaves. The story ends by saying:

"Because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need." (Luke 11:8b)

Then comes the famous passage:

"Ask, seek, knock. To the one who knocks the door will be open." (Luke 11:9 paraphrased)

This is how we should pray and ask God to work and transform. With foolish, wake-him-up-in-the-middle-of-the-night kind of faith. Shamelessly. Without hedging our bets or rationalizing our way out of it.

So for now we pray, and as best as we can, we minister the words of truth and reality faithfully. Don't conflate the mundane and the meaningless. Talking about dating again is just as much a potential window for them and you into the transcendent work of the Spirit as an in depth study on your favorite topic. Our preferences or priorities don't dictate the place where God can and will do the most; rather, it's our faithfulness, our openness, and theirs that provides a soil where transformation can happen.

So the question for us is, are we ready for this? Are we ready to embrace the posture of vulnerability that is totally expectant that God will do transformative work, despite how little we know about how that will happen or when? Are we humble enough to trust that we can't control much of this, but that is actually good news?! We just get to be faithful and continue to do our best to scatter the seed with the best tools we have. And one day, as we wake and as we sleep, something amazing happens, and we get to see the harvest. Sometimes sooner, sometimes later.