

How Reading the Bible can Lead to Christ-like Transformation

Ephesians 4:17-24; 2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:6

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A few weeks ago, I started meeting with another group for our church's Discovery Class. It's for anyone interested in Christianity Baptism and/or church membership. We get together and talk about the Christian life. No question is out of bounds. We can talk about anything.

One area of discussion I always enjoy is our talk about the Bible itself. I ask questions like "What do you think of the Bible? What's your experience with it? How do you find it to read? I want honest answer. I want to hear what people actually experience with the Bible.

They've shared things like "Some parts of the Bible are hard to understand. Some seems completely irrelevant. Why are there lists of laws? Some parts seem hard to believe."

Some of you maybe have little or no experience with the Bible. If you were to share honestly with the person beside you about your Bible reading journey, you might share some ups and downs. Maybe you find it boring. Maybe you seldom read it. Maybe it's a chore or you think it's not very relevant. Some of you might believe the Bible is only accessible to the super-spiritual or those with special training. Or you might desire to understand the Bible more deeply. But you have limited time and energy to put into gaining an understanding with everything else going on in your life.

Yet others might have a different story. Some might share that it's their lifeline. Some include Bible reading in their daily routine because it's so important to their lives. Some might point to a verse in the Bible that dramatically changed their life.

So what's the difference? Why do some people find the Bible boring and irrelevant? Why do others find it life changing? There are many reasons. But we are going to focus in on a major one today. To get to this reason I'm going to make a claim about Bible reading. **Reading the Bible can lead to Christ-like transformation in our lives.** But how? Why do some people not experience this transformation while others do?

To answer these questions, we will first look at a passage that reveals this major reason why people don't experience life transformation through God's Word. Then, we will return to our central passage for this series – 2 Corinthians 3:18-4:6 to discover how reading the Bible can lead to Christ-like transformation. By the end of our time

together, I pray that you will see how such transformation is possible and gain inspiration to invest more deeply in connecting with God through His Word.

Ephesians 4:17-24 English Standard Version (ESV) P. 830.

¹⁷ Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

2 Corinthians 3:18-4:6 English Standard Version (ESV) P. 819.

¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

⁴ Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. ² But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

From the Ephesians passage, we seek to answer the first question - **Why do some people NOT EXPERIENCE Christ-like transformation from reading the Bible?** The passage comes in another letter the Apostle Paul wrote to Christians living at Ephesus. He spent the first 3 chapters of Ephesians describing salvation and all the benefits Christians receive with Christ in their life. But then in chapter 4, he begins to teach how in our lives should change to become more Christ-like. We learn this was no theoretical discussion in some classroom for Paul. He is actually in prison on account of his faith while he writes this letter. So in Ephesians 4:1 he writes, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called." Then he talks about living humbly, with gentleness and patience. He calls for unity among believers. He shows how Jesus gifted some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers to equip God's people for works of ministry. He paints a picture of a healthy well-functioning body to represent Christ and His church.

But then in Ephesians 4:17, he gets quite personal. He wants to impress upon these Ephesian Christians the necessity of significant life change because of their new relationship with Christ. So he starts off by directing them away from living like people who don't know Christ. In verse 17 he says, "You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do in the futility of their minds." Then he describes the spiritual condition of the unbeliever in verse 18. "They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance that is in them due to their hardness of heart." This is the spiritual reality for unbelievers. This describes you if you're not a Christian or those around you who don't know Christ. Living in darkness not understanding the things of God alienated from Him as if they are enemies or combatants. And they bear some responsibility for this because of hard hearts.

Then he ties these spiritual realities to the way unbelievers live. So verse 19 – unbelievers can become callous to God. Callousness is a hardening of the skin so that it has less feeling from the poke of a branch or a sharp end. Well unbelievers have a spiritual callousness towards God so they don't feel little jabs in their conscience from God or they feel less or no guilt when committing a sin. When such a hardness settles, it shows up in the way we live. He describes his at the end of verse 19. "They have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity." Hardness towards God leads to actions contrary to honoring Him. Since God is pure, it is only natural that those hardened towards Him will be drawn towards impurity. So Paul warns Christians to turn away from that old life in verses 17-19.

But then in 20-24, he describes the life they need to live. Verse 22. "You were taught to put off your old self which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." So put off your old self; like putting off old dirty clothes, be renewed in the spirit of your minds, put on your new self."

But in verse 22, we find an answer to the question "Why do some people NOT EXPERIENCE Christ-like transformation from reading the Bible?" Notice verse 22 says "You were taught to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life." So this refers to life before Christ. At the end of verse 22 he describes that life. "Your former manner of life was corrupt through deceitful desires."

Now think about deceitful desires for a moment. Something is deceitful if it portrays itself as able to deliver something but knows all along it couldn't deliver it. Someone is deceitful if they commit to do something or be someone while knowing they have no intention or ability to follow through on it. Now think about applying deceit to desires. A

desire is to feel or want something strongly. Desires for meaning, satisfaction, freedom, connection. We are all born with them. Some are good and natural. God intended us to satisfy these desires within his boundaries. But if we try to satisfy these desires outside of God's good boundaries, they can begin to deceive us. We may experience some satisfaction but the desire begins to corrupt us. Or a deceitful desire that is obviously sinful or against God. Yet we believe that satisfying these desires are good for us. They are deceitful desires.

John Piper: "A deceitful desire tricks us into thinking that pursuing it will lead to a greater satisfaction than God could provide". Such deceitful desires can provide some temporary satisfaction. But eventually we experience less satisfaction from them. Or we realize that following them has led nowhere. Or it has led to a lot of trouble. Or it has failed to satisfy at the deepest levels. So they have to go deeper with that desire or try a different one in an attempt to find something that will provide permanent satisfaction. Yet all deceitful desires deceive. They portray themselves as able to provide greater satisfaction than God. But they will all fail in the end. The Bible tells us that without God our deepest desires won't be fulfilled – Ps 112:10 says "the desires of the wicked will perish." Yet millions and millions of people live with some or several deceitful desires as their supreme heart treasure. They live this never ending cycle of trying to satisfy a desire that can't deliver what's expected. So the first part of the answer to our question of why some don't experience life transformation through reading the Bible is **Deceitful Desires reign supreme in our hearts apart from Christ.**

This certainly describes non-believers. It can also describe believers who have wandered far from Christ. So let's imagine they try to read the Bible. Say they hear that it's a good idea to read the Bible. They start to read. They see the claims of the Bible. They even see commands from God that are supposed to be good for them

They may even try to live God's way for a while. But nothing in their heart changes. The deceitful desire still rules. They may not even know that the desire deceives. They think it will satisfy. So though they read the Bible and try some changes, it doesn't last. **So Bible reading won't lead to life change unless there is a change in desires.** Or the put it another way, Bible reading won't lead to life change unless there is heart change.

For unbelievers, such a change is not possible because they have not received Christ into their lives. To use 2 Corinthians 4:6 terminology, God has not shone the light of the Gospel in their hearts. So though they read the Bible, they have this deceitful desire barrier in their heart. Think of all the other barriers we've talked about in the last few weeks. A

veil lies over our heart. 2 Cor. 3:15; 4:3. The god of this world has blinded their minds. 2 Cor. 4:4. They loved the darkness - John 3:21. Or they suppressed the truth about God like we saw last week in Romans 1:18, 25. So they see no light; no glory of God. There is no displacement of deceitful desires. No heart change. So there is no life transformation.

So what must happen so that it becomes possible for a person to experience life transformation through reading the Bible? It all starts with God's work in our hearts and our response to it. So 2 Corinthians 4:6 needs to happen to us. **God shines in our heart the light of the Gospel.** "For God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." God overcomes the blinding work of Satan, the hardness in our hearts and the darkness over our minds. He declares "let there be light." We receive that by trusting in Christ by responding to God's call. At that moment, Christ comes in as God shines in our hearts.

So with a heart now awakened, we read the Bible with the eyes of our hearts opened and unveiled. In Ephesians 1:18, Paul prays that the "eyes of our hearts would be enlightened or opened, so that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance with the saints and the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe. The eyes of our heart are open. And our faces become unveiled. 2 Corinthians 3:16 But when one turns to the Lord the veil is removed.

So with the eyes of our heart enlightened, **we see the glory of God.** 2 Corinthians 3:18 – And we all, with unveiled faces, behold the glory of the Lord. Maybe God reveals Himself as absolutely pure. God shows us the beauty of His holiness. Or God shows His love through the account of Jesus' ministry to the man born lame down at the pool. Or God shows us His sovereignty through the book of Revelation as He governs the end times.

Then we begin to see that God is infinitely more satisfying than our deceitful desire. We see that in God we find one who is absolutely holy, loving, self-sacrificing, merciful, compassionate and forgiving. Here we find someone who is not a fair weather friend. He's not someone who befriends us just to use us. He loves us so much He was willing to send His Son to die for us and rescue us. **We begin to see God as desirable.** We start to understand a little more what Isaiah meant in Isaiah 26:8 – In the path of your judgments O Lord, we wait for you; your name and remembrance are the desire of our soul.

As we see more of God's Glory in the Bible, our desire continue to grow. It grows until it's greater than the deceitful desire that we have placed in the supreme position in our hearts. So what happens? **Our desire for God displaces our**

deceitful desires. We begin to find the truth behind a verse like Psalm 73:25 – “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

Then what happens if the greatest desire of our hearts is God Himself? “Oh, God is my greatest desire. But this thing I’m doing in my life over here doesn’t honor my greatest desire. It dishonors Him. So why would I keep doing that? Why would I do something that hinders satisfaction in my greatest desire – God? **So, by the Holy Spirit’s power, we are being transformed. Our lives begin to change.** That’s 2 Corinthians 3:18 again. “And we with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed from one degree of glory to another into the same image. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” That’s life transformation. That’s all possible through reading the Bible with the eyes of our heart opened spiritually by God.

Now notice that I have portrayed this process as a circle and not a straight line. I did that because I believe this is a recurring cycle. I think we have many deceitful desires in our heart. I think that as God reveals more of His glory to us, it will kick out more of our deceitful desires. As we grow, God will become our supreme desire in more areas of our lives. Only when we die or go to heaven will this process be complete.

But for now, we need to continue to engage in this process by Reading the Bible. **Reading the Bible can lead to transformation into Christ likeness.** But notice the word “can.” I chose can and not will. Reading the Bible does not guarantee a person will be transformed into Christ-likeness. I know this because of my own experience. Sometimes, I am not really that attentive when I read the Bible. Sometimes I come with the wrong attitude. Sometimes I don’t put in the effort. So Bible-reading does not guarantee life transformation.

Nor does it necessarily lead to instant life transformation. I think we see God’s glory and wisdom. Sometimes we change right away in response. But often it takes a long time for God’s glory & way to work its way through our lives. Sometimes we don’t listen or resist change. We hang on to that deceitful desire for maybe even years until finally we relent and cooperate with what the Holy Spirit wants to do in us.

I know this because I have resisted God’s glory and command for long periods of time until I yielded to His Spirit. Here’s one example.

When I was 11 or 12 years old, I really started getting into Canadian Professional Football. Growing up in Calgary, I became a Calgary Stampeders fan. When I got old enough, I would buy my own tickets. In those days, you had paper

tickets. You had to go and buy them at a store or the stadium and physically pick them up. I would get my tickets and put them on my bedroom mirror. I would see them every day and look forward to the day when the football game would arrive.

Then the day arrived and I took my ticket. And went with my friends. We went to the stadium and watched the game. If the Stampeders won, I would keep my ticket and write the score on it and maybe put in my night table drawer. I would be so happy for a days. If they lost, I would throw my ticket away and be down for days. This carried on into my late teens and young adulthood. I would get so high or so low depending on how my team did. When I moved away from Calgary to come to Edmonton for seminary, I came into enemy territory – I would have to suffer for my conviction so I had to watch games on TV. I would be so focused on the TV. And if anyone talked with me during the game I would get angry with them for interrupting.

Then I got married to Lori. And she doesn't like professional sports. But we agreed we would get married anyway. I thought "that's just a minor flaw she has that will change as she begins to see the beauty of Canadian football. But that didn't happen. And she had the nerve to talk to me about ordinary house stuff during a football game. I would get so irritated with her. How could she possibly be concerned about some little problem in the house or how her day went while I am in this immensely important activity of watching my football game? And I'm sure there were times she felt slighted and ignored while I was immersed in the game.

Then one day I read in the Bible Ephesians 5:28-29 about husbands loving their wives. "In the same way as Christ loved the church, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it just as Christ does the church." It hit me. There were times, many times I cherished professional sports more than my wife. But God had revealed the glory of Jesus cherishing the church. God revealed such cherishing was beautiful and when husbands cherish their wives, it can portray a glorious picture of Christ's self-sacrificing love for His bride – the church. I believe now that the Holy Spirit used that text to impress upon me that my behavior was wrong. Some game on TV was infinitely less important than my wife.

Slowly but surely God has been working in my heart in this area. Especially in the last 10-15 years. I have become more and more dissatisfied and disillusioned with professional sports. They say they care about the fans. But really – they've gotten more money. The time required or the money demanded is so vast. I remember reading about with actor

Ben Affleck a few years ago and his love for the Boston Red Sox baseball team. Sox. I never saw the movie but I came across a quote I will never forget. Someone noted in the movie, "You sure love the Red Sox." He answered, "Oh yes I do." Then the questioner, maybe his friend asked "have the Red Sox ever loved you?" This stopped him in his tracks as he began to wonder why he gave so much of his heart, passion and energy to an organization that never loved him personally.

How different compared to the love of God. Now following a professional sports team is not sinful. Some of our desires are not evil or sinful. But they can be deceitful and trick us into believing that if only we give ourselves completely to them, we will find ultimate satisfaction. And substitute professional for whatever might be your deceitful desire. Love of comfort. Vacations. Retirement. A new car or piece of technology. Our children and their success. Our work and their career. Parties. Drinking. Getting High. Making money. Holding power. Becoming beautiful. Getting affirmation on Social Media. Straight A's. Some of these involve no sin in themselves. But if we allow them to become the supreme treasure in our heart, we commit idolatry. Regularly coming to God's Word can expose our idols and deceitful desires.

God is supreme, good, satisfying, persevering, loving, sustaining and steadfast. The more we see Him and His glory, the more we will desire Him and displace our idols and then be transformed in our lives.

Since reading the Bible can lead to Christ-like transformation, we must invest in God's Word. To invest in a non-financial way means to commit time, energy and effort with the expectation of some worthwhile result.

You can begin doing that this week by simply adding one question to your Bible reading? What does passage say about God? The potential for you to see His glory and enjoy it can lead to an increased desire for Him. This can displace deceitful desires and open your life to the Holy Spirit's transformation. But we're also going to focus the next few messages on this with the question "How can we read the Word of God with God?" We will learn to read God's word in a way that increases the likelihood for our seeing His glory and discovery His beauty and desiring Him more deeply which will kick out the deceitful desires that destroy us.

But to close today, I need to briefly speak to two groups of people here today. If you're not a Christians, you may read the Bible, but not see anything in it that glorious. But it doesn't have to stay that way in your life.

For any actual Christ-like transformation to happen in your life and mine, Christ had to die. For without His death, there would be no way for God to shine in our hearts the light of the Gospel. There would be this barrier between us and God that could not be bridged. But because of Christ's death, God can shine in our hearts the light of the gospel. You can

receive this light by first admitting that you have been living like the people back in Ephesians 4:17-19. Your heart has been callous towards God. If you want God's light in your life, you need to repent or turn away from that old life and turn towards Christ. You must put all your trust or faith on Him. In that moment, God will pour His gospel and light through your faith into your life. So if you want to do that today, you can talk with the people you know here and tell them you want to turn to Christ or you can come to the front after and talk to me or the people who are here to pray.

Believers, what, if anything, needs to change in your life so that you can invest more in God's Word so that you can encounter and hear from God consistently? Maybe its not just our lives that need transformation. It's the way we read the Bible. It must not be just for checking off a box on a bible reading plan or learning doctrine or for proving a point in an argument or for getting in someone's good books. It must be to see God and His glory so desire for Him displaces our deceitful desires. Then our lives and relationships will begin to change. Taste & see that the Lord is good. Will you come to God in prayer now. May God help us to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of coming to Him & His Word.