

How Christ Changes Us By His Grace



By Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp

The Bible calls you to live a Christ-like life. But how can you do this in the midst of seemingly impossible daily challenges? Everyday entanglements bind you or preoccupy you. Perhaps you struggle to get through each day. Worries, emotions, relationship struggles, financial problems, perhaps even addictions keep a person in a constant state of anxiety. It is so easy to be too tired, too frantic, or too lazy to even consider a closer relationship with Christ, let alone to live like Him.

How can you change? How can any one of us even attempt to live Christ-like lives? The answer is that you cannot do it by yourself. Nor can you do it quickly. Instead, you are called to a personal commitment to a lifelong process of transformation into the image of Christ. Personal change is not easy. Rather, change occurs over a lifetime as you learn to more faithfully walk with the Lord. It occurs as you shift your focus from just getting through the frustrations of each day to looking far into the

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future—in fact to eternity.

One of the many amazing things Christ is doing right now is changing each and all of His people by the power of His Holy Spirit into people worthy of honor in His kingdom. Someday we will receive a crown of righteousness, a crown of life, and a crown of glory from His powerful and gracious hands. When the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Pet. 5:4). When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory (Col. 3:4).

How People Change¹

Living a Christ-like life and discipling others to do the same is more than a system of change or a set of techniques. The process of change rests on the presence and power of a living, active Redeemer. The personalness of this process encourages you to look at yourself in the mirror of God's Word. To know and rely on Christ's grace is no formula or strategy. The presence of your Shepherd enables you to step out into life with renewed faith and courage.

God places many beautiful truths in the foundation of biblical change. We will consider three: eternity, union with Christ, and

¹ This article is based on the curriculum *How People Change: How Christ Changes Us by His Grace*, by Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp (Glenside, Pa: Christian Counseling Education Foundation, 2003).

community. We will look at these in turn.

1. We Have Hope in Eternity

Eternity is our ultimate destination. Living with God in view gives hope and perspective in our daily situations and relationships. We search for meaning and purpose for the events and activities in our lives: the shocking tragedy of terrorist actions, a cancer diagnosis, racial profiling, excessive work hours, and so on. As we suffer, struggle, achieve, or relax, we ask ourselves, consciously or subconsciously, “What is the point? What is the purpose? What does this all mean? Why are we here?” The answers we give ourselves—the meanings we give to our thoughts and actions—either keep us on the same old path or move us in radically different directions. Either we continue doing what we have always done and suffer the consequences, or we choose to change. Either we focus on what is happening now, or we focus on eternity.

Whether in little everyday ways or in hugely significant moments, we try to make sense of our lives. We express dissatisfaction with our lives the way they are right now. We instinctively know that things are not the way they were meant to be. Whether it is the fighting between our children, the strained relationships with a spouse or family member, difficult work relationships, or haunting memories of terrible childhood abuse, we all sense and experience brokenness in our world.

We think, *How wonderful life could be if only the boss were more patient. If only my husband were more caring. If only my father didn't drink so much. If only my son would quit arguing and listen to me. If only our neighborhood was more friendly. If only we had been able to get that house. If only I could defeat my despondency. If only our church understood my plight as a single parent. If only I could enjoy good health, financial stability, or the respect of friends. If only.... If only.... If only....*

Everyday we think about how life would be if things were different. We even evaluate our lives and attempt to make changes. We envision change. We try various strategies to bring about change, sometimes with a bit of short-term success. But our best intentions for change always fall short. Our desires for change are not wrong; they are just not deep enough. The Bible confronts us with a hard-to-accept reality: The change most needed in our lives isn't change in

our situations, circumstances, or relationships, but in ourselves—in our own hearts.

But there is hope. Despite our failings, God is still intent on rescuing us from ourselves. His view of change is vastly different than ours. We want to cope better, have more fun, have better relationships, have more money, have a bigger house. But He wants to change us from people who “live for themselves” (2 Cor. 5:15) to people who are *like Him*. This is real change! God replaces our selfish, sinful natures with His divine nature! God shapes us in His own image. In the middle of our struggles, He radically transforms our hearts by His grace, so that we are able to think, desire, act, and speak in ways consistent with who He is and what He is doing on earth. Our desire for change begins to line up with God's purposes for change. Leaving behind goals of personal comfort and self-fulfillment, we reach for Christ. We desire to be more like Him every day. And as we do this, we become more and more prepared for our ultimate destination: eternity with Him.

In the midst of our struggles, though, we don't naturally connect the ways we think, feel, and act with our ultimate destination of life in heaven with Christ. It takes the work of the Holy Spirit to help us bridge the gap and connect our struggles to our future in eternity. But God meets us and changes our hearts in the middle of our greatest joys, our most difficult relationships, our problems, and our deepest sorrows. Positive personal change takes place when our dream of change lines up with God's purposes for change. Paul expresses it this way in his letter to the Philippians.

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:9-11)

Keeping eternity in view as we go about our daily lives gives us a broader perspective. It gives us hope for change in the midst of our difficult situations and relationships.

2. We Are Married to Christ

In his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul

describes the Christians' relationship to Christ in a profoundly intimate term—marriage.

I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. (2 Cor. 11:2-3)

Paul speaks of Christ as a "husband" and Christians as pure virgin brides. God reconciles sinners to Himself through Christ and welcomes us into this intensely personal relationship. He does not simply tolerate us. He brings us close to Himself by giving Himself to us. Christ is our husband and we are His bride. We are in Christ, with Christ, one with Christ. Notice at least three profound implications of our union with Christ.

- When you are spiritually married to Christ, the core of your present life is not your own present personal happiness, but spiritual purity. Like any other marriage, the big issue is your commitment to fidelity. The question is, "Will you remain faithful to Jesus alone and not seek fulfillment elsewhere?"
- Your betrothal to Christ gives this passage a "now and then" structure. Your "now" life is preparation for your "then" marriage to Christ in eternity. Now—my life on earth—is a time of preparation for that day. The complete fulfillment of this relationship with Christ will take place in heaven, though we do experience it in part now. Since Christ is the ultimate reward, everything else that could draw me away from Him is no longer essential.
- For Paul, the heart of Christianity is remaining faithful to Christ in a world where many "lovers" seek your allegiance and affection. Paul's Christianity is intensely relational. Christ is at the center of your life. It is so much more than such religious practices as having devotions, giving money, and participating in ministry. Certainly these are not wrong. But they are not the

primary focus of our relationship to Christ; they are fruits of that relationship.

Our life changes when we are wed to Christ! That change is much more than change in our circumstances, relationships, or status. We become different at the deepest spiritual level. Our inner spiritual natures are transformed by the power of Christ's grace. Our hearts were once totally enslaved to sin and now they have been freed. The changes that result from our union with Christ are so fundamental that the Bible says that in Him we become "new creatures" (2 Cor. 5:17). Because we are united with Christ, the power of sin has been broken. Sin is progressively eradicated from our lives!

This is what the Christian life is about. With joy we affirm that we are new creatures in Christ. With humility, we confess that there is still sin in my heart.

We need God's grace today as much as I did when I first believed. The Savior who made us new calls us to be committed to His daily work of renewal. And this personal renewal takes place in the midst of our circumstances and relationships.

3. We Are Part of the Christian Community

When the apostle Paul discipled new believers, he repeatedly reminded them that there was help in Christ and in Christ's people, the church.

You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit. (Eph. 2:19-22)

Our personal relationship with God links us to other believers. Our transformation is worked out within the family of God. This is not necessarily the simpler way: being involved with other people can be inefficient, complicated, and time consuming. So many things can go wrong in relationships. But this is why

community is such a big part of God's plan to transform us into the image of Christ. The more we understand our own hearts, the more we see that it takes a work of God's grace to transform us from self-absorbed individuals into a community of love.

Do you get a sense of how big the love of Christ is? The love of Christ is so long and high and deep that we cannot see this love or experience it all by our finite selves. We have to grasp it "together with the saints" (Eph. 3:18). As isolated individuals, we cannot reach the level of maturity that God has designed for us. This fullness happens as we live in a loving, redemptive community with one another, as we struggle together, and as we grow together.

These three major points form the foundation for biblical change: knowing where God is taking us; knowing that as a Christian, we are married to Christ; and knowing that change occurs with community support.

Life as God Sees It; Change as God Does It

Do you ever feel lost in the middle of your own world? Perhaps you know a lot about yourself, God, and others, but you are not sure how to put it all together. You struggle, but you don't know why. You are depressed, but you don't know why. Your teenage son is adversarial and you can't understand what he wants. Your picture of life seems out of focus. Your life seems out of your control. You are lost in a muddle.

But look at it another way. If you are lost in the middle of a big city, you need an overview of the whole city—the big picture, a helicopter view—to give you a better orientation. With the big picture in mind, you have a clearer idea of where you are and where you need to go. The Bible doesn't always seem to give you this clear helicopter view of life. Scripture sometimes seems like a haphazard collection of stories, poems, teachings, and commands unrelated to your everyday concerns. Yet when carefully examined, the Bible does provide the essential elements that give an overall picture of life as God sees it and change as God does it. When you begin to see this overall picture, you can begin to sense what God is doing in the details of your life. Understanding how God typically uses daily life to change our hearts is an essential part of this growth and change process.

The Bible typically uses concrete images to illustrate spiritual truths. Jeremiah provides a good example.

This is what the LORD says: "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD. He will be like a **bush in the wastelands**; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.

But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in Him. He will be like a **tree** planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when **heat** comes; its leaves are always green,

It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear **fruit**." The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

I, the LORD, search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve." (Jer. 17:5-10)

The metaphors of this passage form a model: desert heat, a thorny bush in the wasteland, streams of life from God in Christ, and a fruitful tree. We will organize our thoughts through a picture of "The Three Trees." (See figure 1.)

Heat describes life and all that comes upon us in a fallen world. It represents a person's current situation with all of its difficulties, temptations, and blessings. God knows the details of our lives and worlds and He sees how we respond in these situations.

The Thorn Bush, the first tree in the wasteland, represents ungodly responses to difficulties, temptations, and blessings. God does not just look at our behavior and our reactions to our trials, He searches our hearts' mastering intentions, beliefs, and desires.

The Cross of Christ, the second tree, is the source of living water. This captures the redemptive activity of God on our behalf. He brings comfort, cleansing, and the power to change in the midst of life's challenges.

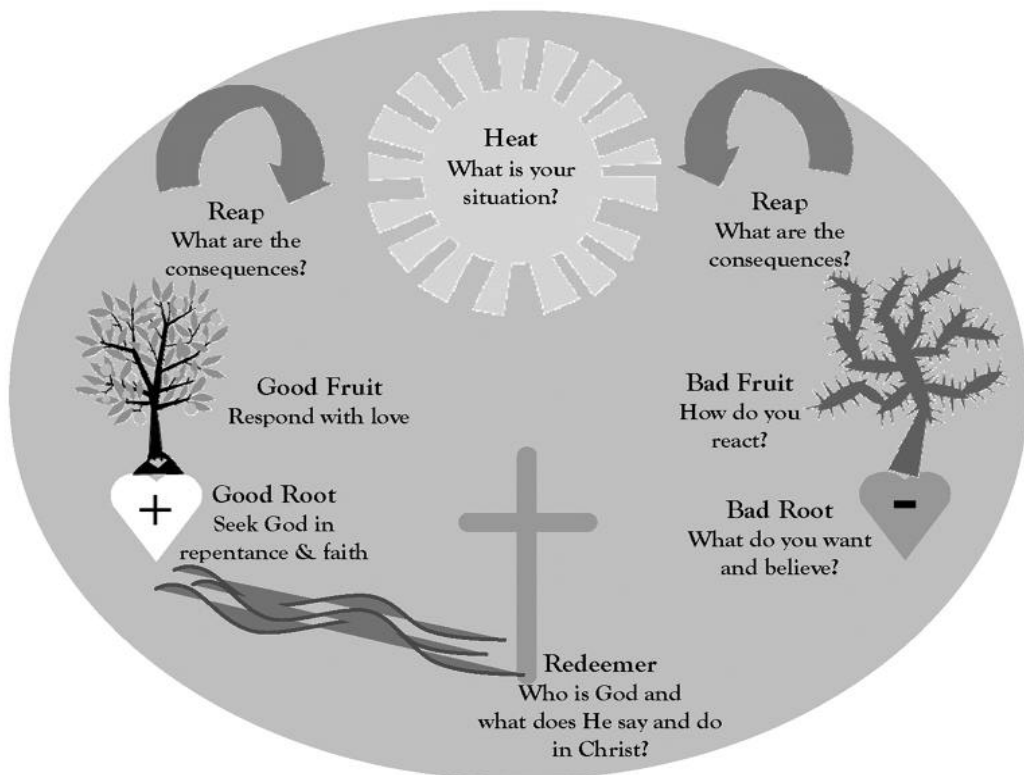


FIGURE 1. THE THREE TREES (JER. 17:5-10)

The Fruitful Tree, the third tree, represents the person who trusts in the Lord, who learns to respond in a godly manner to his problems. God’s redemptive power at work in the heart renewed by grace enables the person to respond in a godly manner to all circumstances. God produces a harvest of good fruit in our lives.

Now look more carefully at these elements introduced by Jeremiah.

1. Heat: What is Your Difficulty?

Scripture always locates people in a life situation. The letter of James is quite interesting in this regard. He begins by saying, “Count it all joy when you meet *various trials*.” He doesn’t specify the kind of trials, but leaves us to fill in the blanks.

For James, a trial is an external situation (*heat*) that reveals the heart’s intentions. A trial can lead to significant growth at the heart level or it can lead to temptation and sin. In other words, a trial can produce *fruit* or it can produce

thorns. It all depends on what is happening inside a person. And both difficulties and blessings present opportunities for temptation and sin, or for testing and growth. If the trial leads to temptation and sin, it is because the person’s heart has been “dragged away and enticed” by his “own evil desires.” Nothing in the situation—the heat—makes you sin, or makes you loving and wise. You either choose to sin or choose for God in every circumstance.

2. Thorns: What Sin Entangles You?

All ungodly behavior grows out of a heart that has been captured by something other than Christ. We are fruit trees by the grace of God, but we still have thorn bush responses to life. We all tend to respond sinfully to the circumstances of life. We bend and twist the truth. We harbor anger and bitterness. We shift blame. We manipulate others to get what we want. We communicate in harsh and judgmental ways. We numb ourselves with business, substances, or material possessions. We attempt to get our identity from other people or from our performance. We give in to

lust. We give way to vengeance. We get defensive and self-protective. We respond selfishly and thoughtlessly. The list could go on and on. All of these responses are thorns on the bush. Facing the ways we are like thorn bushes is one of God's chief ways of transforming us into fruit trees.

God calls us back from the wide-angle helicopter view to zoom in and humbly take a close look at ourselves. He calls us to believe and act upon the gospel promises of forgiveness, restoration, wisdom, strength, deliverance, and power by acknowledging our responsibility for our thorn-like responses. Developing into fruit trees always starts with recognizing and removing the sinful thorns from our lives.

3. The Cross: Christ Brings New Identity and New Potential

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing! (Gal. 2:20-21)

Paul's emphasis here is that the cross defines our identity and potential right here and now. From birth, each of us was under the control and dominion of sin. But in His death, Christ broke the spiritual dominion sin had over us. His death on the cross permanently alters who we are now and who we will continue to be. We have been forever changed. We no longer live under the weight of the law or the domination of sin. Christ's death fulfilled the law's requirements and broke the power of sin. We do not have to give in to sin. We can live in new ways amid the same old situations

Then Paul says something even more amazing. Our hearts, once under the domination of sin, now are the dwelling place of Christ, the ultimate source of righteousness, wisdom, grace, power, and love. Our hearts can respond to life in brand new ways because we are no longer dominated by sin, but we are liberated by the gracious rule of Christ. We base our lives on the fact that because Jesus lives in us, we can do what is right in desire, thought, word, and action, no matter what specific

suffering or trial we face. Our potential is Christ!

4. Good Fruit Comes from Real Heart Change

What will my life look like if I measure my potential based on my union with the indwelling Christ? As we say "yes" to the indwelling Holy Spirit, His living water produces new fruit in our hearts: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These character qualities aren't unrealistic standards that God holds over us. They are gifts the Spirit produces in us. This change within us changes the way we respond to the things and people around us.

The Christian life should be a state of thankful discontentment or joyful dissatisfaction! We live every day thankful for the amazing grace that fundamentally changes our lives, but we should not be satisfied. Why not? Because, when we look at ourselves, honestly, we have to admit that there is still need for personal growth and change. We are not yet all that we could be in Christ. We are thankful for the many things in our lives that would not be there without His grace, but we should not settle for partial inheritance. We should want nothing less than all that is our in Christ! In this sense, God does not want us to be content with less than what He wants for us. He calls us to continue to wrestle, meditate, look, consider, watch, examine, run, persevere, confess, resist, submit, follow, and pray until we have been completely transformed into His likeness.

The life of self-examination and joyful discontent should not be confused with a life of paralyzing self-condemnation. God does not call us to self-loathing, but to a willingness to examine our response to life while holding onto our hope as new creatures in Christ. That hope is not based only on the promise of forgiveness, but also on His promise of personal deliverance and restoration as well. That same God that has forgiven us is now in the process of radically changing us. We must not be satisfied until that work is complete.

God Changes Us in the Middle of Our Toughest Challenges

The Heat-Thorns-Cross-Fruit picture represents how God changes us in the middle of

the toughest challenges of life.

Heat: Trials, pressures, temptations, and difficulty surround our lives.

Thorns: We respond in sinful ways to what we face in life. We have inner reasons for our sin.

Cross: God meets us in our sin with His heart-transforming grace.

Fruit: We respond in new ways to our old difficulties as our hearts are transformed.

Two first-person case studies, “Self-Counseling Projects,” follow this article and give practical examples of how a person can analyze his or her specific struggles using this model. You, too, choose a personal struggle in your own life and work through it using this model. Do you get angry with other drivers on the road? Do you yell at your children? Do you overspend and live above your means? Are you a workaholic? Do you procrastinate when important work needs to be done? Do you resort to grumbling and complaining when things don’t go your way? Do

you gossip about your work acquaintances? Do you envy the material possessions of others? Do you speak unkindly to others when they don’t meet your needs? Do you blame God for your problems? Do you eat too much? Watch TV too much? Work too much?

First read these stories about pride and about worry—and then insert your own story. God calls you to come to this point. He calls you down from the wide-angle helicopter view to zoom in and humbly take a close look at yourself. He calls you to believe and act upon the gospel promises of forgiveness, restoration, wisdom, strength, deliverance, and power by acknowledging your responsibility for your own ungodly responses to life’s difficult situations. Getting to the fruit tree always starts with recognizing and removing the thorns.

Whatever the heat of your current situation, we challenge you to work through it using this model. May God bless you as you grow and change under His guidance and in His power.