

Be with Jesus

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[0 : 00] We're called to a whole life of being with Jesus and growing with Jesus. Paul sums that up there by saying, Be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

Then he goes on to that description of what that looks like as our minds are renewed in Christ. Woody Allen, who is nearly 89 years old, but a few years ago, said this, My relationship with death remains the same.

I'm strongly against it. All I can do is wait for it. He went on to say a little bit more.

He said, One must have one's delusions to live. If you look at life too honestly and too clearly, life does become unbearable because it's a pretty grim enterprise.

Very often when we hear some of the words of Woody Allen, I find I both laugh and cry at the same time. And I think that's very much the case there. But I think those words possibly capture the way many, many people regard life and death.

[1 : 28] That death is something that we can do is just wait for it to happen. Perhaps engage ourselves with some kind of preoccupation in the meantime.

But you know, there couldn't be a greater contrast with what it is to have life in Christ, to live in Christ.

As we said, as we thought about last week, that, as John Mark Comer puts it in this book, I think really quite brilliantly, he says that being a Christian is not about getting into heaven, but rather it's about getting heaven into you.

That means, yes, it's about making a commitment to Jesus, but it's not just a one-point-in-time commitment. It's a lifelong thing. That means there's never any time for us to get bored as being Christians.

Because it's a lifelong process of having decided to follow Jesus, to knowing him more and more and more, to growing in him, him in us and us in him.

[2 : 37] I'm going to put some things on the screen this morning. I'm going to just start by giving you this image. I don't know if you've ever done this, but if you put a white rose in food colouring, the rose eventually changes colour.

Now, I'm not a scientist, but you can kind of work out roughly what happens there. The dye becomes absorbed, and so it changes the colour of that rose.

The question is, does that happen because the rose is in the dye, or because the dye is in the rose? See, following Jesus is a life of being transformed.

It's about being in Christ, and Christ in you. And there may be that point in time, when perhaps it's a point of decision, but let's not think for one moment that the Christian gospel and our response to it is about just that one moment, but rather it is a whole life process, calling, invitation, of being in Christ and growing in Christ and knowing his presence more and more and more and more and more, and it doesn't stop.

But being with Jesus, becoming Christ-like, it doesn't just happen. It doesn't just happen.

[4 : 09] And Paul, not just here, but elsewhere as well in his letters, describes this Christian life of discipleship. It is one of being transformed, but it's a lifelong process, and it does call on us to make an effort.

Now, as we were thinking about last week, when Paul talks about, you know, work out your salvation, it doesn't mean work for salvation. It's not about earning salvation.

salvation is a free gift from God. There is nothing you or I can do to earn it. But as we respond to that free gift, so we are called to work it out, and that takes effort.

And as we read this list that we had just a moment ago of what that Christian life looks like, it's challenging stuff. It doesn't just happen. And so we're called, in response to the grace of God, that

unconditional grace of God, to work that out, to be transformed, Paul says, by the renewal of your mind.

Now, that word, being transformed, can too easily be glossed over. And what I want to do now is just spend a few moments just unpacking it a little bit more, thinking about what it actually might mean.

[5 : 28] And I would suggest that perhaps the best way of starting that is to think of words that are fairly similar, but not quite the same. So he talks about be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

And there are a number of words that have the second part of that word, transformed, transformed in it, which are similar, but are not quite the same. The first one is this.

It's coming up on the screen. To be formed. You see, that's the second part of the word, transformed. To be formed. And people will often talk about spiritual formation.

Now, I think one of the really helpful and interesting insights in John Mark Comer's book, *Practicing the Way*, is he says that spiritual formation is not just a Christian thing.

Spiritual formation is a human thing. And it's part of our human makeup that we are in the business of spiritual transformation.

[6 : 35] Why? Sorry, spiritual formation. Why? Because every single one of us as a human being are spiritual beings. Whether you believe in God or not, you can be an atheist, but your life is still a process of spiritual formation.

Simply because we are spiritual beings. We are not just flesh and blood, but there is this spiritual dimension about us. And it doesn't matter who you are, your life always has been and always will be during your time on earth, a process of spiritual formation.

Whether you are Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Adolf Hitler, Vladimir Putin, dear old Donald Trump even, your life is a process of spiritual formation for better or for worse.

and dare I say every single one of us, it will be a combination of the better and the worse, the good and the not so good. Every time we make a decision, we are engaging whether we are aware of it in a process of being spiritually formed.

Every interaction with another human being, every time we engage with the culture in which we live or we encounter a different culture for the first time, we are in the process of being formed spiritually.

[8 : 12] So the question, therefore, is not whether or not you are ever doing spiritual formation, you are. The question, rather, is what are you being spiritually formed into?

Now there's a question. Take a moment and just reflect on it. I'm not going to ask you to turn to the person next to you and discuss it. Think about it just for a few moments.

As you just take a very quick flash glance at your life up until this point and right now and what's going on it. What are you being formed into spiritually?

Your whole life has been and will continue to be a process of spiritual formation. We do not live in a spiritual vacuum.

Now, Western culture perhaps resists the idea that there is such a thing as absolute truth because our culture says that actually no one has, nobody can claim access to absolute truth and therefore we should always be open-minded about everything.

[9 : 37] Now, at face value that can seem quite a good thing. Nobody likes people that walk around being judgmental. But there's something quite misleading about it because the danger there is it implies a relativism that says there's no such thing as good or bad, it's just what you want it to be.

It was G.K. Chesterton that many years ago said the point of having an open mind is rather like the point of having an open mouth. Eventually, it should close in on something and something that's good for you.

So let's not make too much of a virtue of the culture of open-mindedness. Yes, we should listen, that is vital. We need to listen to others and to one another.

We should do that. But when it comes to being formed, we need to exercise a sense of discernment and critical judgment as to what is good and what is not good.

Because God does not just want us to be spiritually formed, that will happen anyway, including in a world that is broken and hurting. But rather, God calls us to be formed in a particular way and we will come on to that in just a moment.

[11 : 00] So Paul talks about not being formed. He actually says, do not, let's have the next one up, do not be conformed. Do not conform, he says, to the patterns of this world.

What does that mean? Well, quite simply, to conform means that your spiritual formation is one of where you listen and just go along with the crowd. and that can be a very dangerous thing. There's an old story that's told about a group of eggs. They were chickens' eggs except for one of them, which was an eagle's egg. I don't know how the eagle's egg made its way in among the others, but it did.

And they all hatched at roughly the same time and all the chicks grew up together. And as these chicks matured into birds, what you had was a group of chickens and an eagle.

And they all clucked around on the ground all day long, including the eagle. And you can imagine how strange this looked to see this extraordinary, beautiful bird, this eagle, clucking around, eating grain off the ground, following the same movements as his chicken friends.

[12:13] This went on for a long time and then one day another eagle came flying over the place where these birds lived. they all looked up and gasped in wonder, including the eagle on the ground.

And having spent his whole life imitating those around him, he looked at his own wings and he looked at the wings of the eagle flying above and he just began to stretch out his own wings and looked at the eagle above and just thought to himself, maybe, just maybe.

And he began to sort of walk around stretching its wings and began to say to his chicken friends, I'm going to fly. They laughed at him and said, don't be ridiculous.

You weren't born to fly. You're one of us. Tragically, he never flew.

Do not conform, says Paul, to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

[13:25] What does that look like? Let's have the third word up that's similar. To be informed. Now, to be informed is a good thing. To be informed means that we know what's going on and in fact, as we read through these words of Paul, he talks about, he gives us information as to what it looks like to be transformed.

He says things like, never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord, be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer, share with the Lord's people who are in need, practice hospitality, bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse, rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn, live in harmony with one another.

So it goes on. We have a list which gives us information. But, you know, to be informed is not the same thing as being transformed.

We need to be informed. Information is the front porch of understanding. And that is what, you know, reading the Bible, giving us information is an important part of the whole process of being transformed.

But, just information, if we just go to the Bible for information, it is a dangerous thing. You might know the information of the Bible inside out and back to front and never be transformed.

[15:01] You might know the Old Testament so well that you can not only name the, name the Uriah, the Hittite's second cousin, twice removed's wife, but also be able to give me her inside leg measurements in Hebrew.

But that doesn't mean to say you'll be transformed. Now, Bible reading, I mentioned it earlier this morning in the service, is a really, really important thing.

The danger can be that we approach it as an information process alone. And the danger can be with that is that we think, I've got to speed my way through this, I'm going to do my Bible reading today and read it as quickly as possible.

Great, done it, pew, I can get on with my life. Or we can read it and think, I've got to get as much information as possible through this. And it's for this reason why I'm not of the opinion that the starting point in regular Bible reading should be the quantity that we read.

In fact, I would say the opposite. It is far more helpful, I would suggest, to actually make our habit of approaching Scripture not so much in terms of how much can I read today, but how much can I immerse myself in this today and to that end a shorter quantity of Scripture might, might be a more sensible way of doing that.

[16:35] The point is, is that if we read the Bible just to be informed, yes, that's good, it's helpful, but it doesn't take us to where we need to be.

So might possibly we be talking not about information, but the next one is being reformed. Now being reformed is good and when we read that list, again, we read that list in Romans 12 where

Paul gives us a description, the information of what it looks like, you could say, well yes, bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse, rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn, live in harmony with one another, do not be proud, be willing to associate with people of low position, do not be conceited, do not repay evil for evil, all of these different things we might say are hallmarks of a reformed character.

Being reformed is no bad thing, but it doesn't go far enough because it means taking something and changing aspects of it, but that, even that, is not what Paul talks about.

Rather, he says, be transformed, be transformed. So, if we've thought a bit about what being transformed isn't, what does it actually mean?

Well, of course, the New Testament was not written in English, it was written in Greek and the word for transformed is metamorpho in the New Testament Greek. It appears on two other occasions in the New Testament which are not always translated in exactly the same way.

[18:22] But this is important and relevant and helpful in a very practical way, I would suggest, for us to understand. When Paul says be transformed, he has a very particular thing in mind and in order for us to really get to that, it is helpful to look at these two other occasions where the same word, metamorpho, appears within the New Testament.

First, let's look at the Gospels because we find in both Matthew and Mark's account of a very particular time in the life of Jesus, the same word appears and it's the story of what is called the Transfiguration.

Let me read to you Mark's account of that event. After six days, Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a mountain where they were all alone.

There he was transfigured, hold on to that word, there Jesus was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.

I know that sounds like a washing powder advert, it's not. There appeared before them Elijah and Moses who were talking with Jesus and Peter said to Jesus, Rabbi, it is good for us to be here, let us put up three shelters, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.

[19:58] He did not know what to say, they were so frightened. Then a cloud appeared and covered them and a voice came from the cloud, this is my son whom I love, listen to him.

suddenly, when they looked around they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. They were frightened, we're told.

They must have been terrified. This dazzling brightness as Jesus who one day would die and be raised in resurrection glory, they get this glimpse ahead of his death as to what that resurrection looks like.

And what word is used to describe it? Transfiguration in English. But in the New Testament Greek it is the very same word that Paul uses when he says be transformed.

In other words, this New Testament vision of transformation takes us back to the transfiguration or if you like transformation because it's the same word of Jesus.

[21:10] like Jesus at that point in his story, we have not yet died. But we are promised that again like Jesus we will be raised.

Now this is what we're talking about when we're talking about not getting into heaven but heaven getting into you. We have that promise that is like no other promise that one day we won't just simply drift off into some distant spiritual state but we will be given resurrection bodies.

We read about that in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 where Jesus is described as the first fruit of resurrection. What comes after the first fruit well that's you and me.

And that's what the gospel hope is. For that everlasting life, that eternal life when we are raised forever. Look at your hands for one moment. Look at the fingerprints on those hands.

Your fingertips, sorry. The contours, the pattern is unique to you. Embedded in your body is that unique DNA.

[22:21] You and only you will ever be you. And that same body will be transformed according to the word of God. Will be transfigured into an everlasting body.

you will still be the same person in resurrection glory and yet you will be transformed in a way that we can only imagine. Except we're not left alone to imagine it.

We're given God's word to help us imagine what that looks like. We have this story in the life of Jesus where the disciples before his death are given that glimpse as to what the resurrection life is like.

As Jesus is transfigured momentarily in that moment, but is now transformed in his resurrection glory. And that is the vision that we are given to live our lives by now. Not some distant, removed, otherworldly thing, but something that we can know right now in this bodily existence.

[23 : 25] sense. To be transformed means to know that reality of that future everlasting promise now in this body. Be transformed, says Paul.

Latch on to that which awaits you. Now let's bring this back to Paul. Because I said there's another incident, another occasion where we find in the New Testament where mention is made, where the same word transfigure, transform, they mean the same thing, metamorpho, which we find them once again on the lips of Paul.

And we find it in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 and verse 18. The words are on the screen. 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.

Rather than just me read and you listen, let's join in saying these words together because they are actually for every single one of us. Join with me. 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.

To be transformed, not conformed to the patterns of this world, but to be transformed means to know now that which is promised for the future.

[25 : 08] And when Paul calls us to know this, he calls us to lay hold of it, to know that future vision which becomes the reality now. This is getting heaven into you.

Think of the rose in the die. This is the calling that we have to absorb this stuff, to know that we are in Christ and that Christ is in us. And it's not just a one moment thing that happens just one point in time in our lives at the point of conversion or at any other moment, but rather it is a lifelong process of continually being transformed into the knowledge of that resurrection hope that is ours.

Be transfigured, be transformed. We're going to pray in a moment and I want to share with you one last image to help us remember this.

And it's a story about many years ago, I think it's a fable actually, but it's a story about a man who begged and lived outside the gates of a palace.

He lived in rags but one day he was very excited when he saw a sign inviting anybody and everybody in the whole kingdom to a royal banquet that the king was putting on.

[26 : 27] But there was one condition. In order to come to the banquet you had to be clothed in royal garments. Well the man looked at the rags that he lived in and begged in.

And then he looked again at the invitation. And then he looked at the guards standing outside the palace gates and just thought, is it worth a try?

So he went to the guard and he said to him, sir, I would love to come to that banquet. May I just ask a favour? May I talk to the king?

The guard who'd seen this man out there every day for years felt for him and so on the off chance he decided to go and talk to his senior who in turn had the same thought and went to see somebody else, who went to see somebody else, who went to see somebody else and eventually the message was brought to the king himself.

The king's heart was warmed by the story and so he invited him in. The man in his rags was escorted by the guard to somebody who eventually was led to somebody else and he passed through room after room after hallway, passed from one person to another and then eventually he was led to a room in which the king himself was sat.

[27 : 54] This man was shaking like a leaf, could barely look at the king and said, your majesty, I see the invitation to everybody to your banquet.

But I noticed that it says that in order to come you must wear royal garments and yet I only have these rags. Sir, might you be good enough to lend me some of your old royal clothes?

The king loved this. He loved the fact that this man felt that he could approach him. He said, I'm going to give you some of my garments.

He gave instruction for him to go off, be taken off and to be fitted out. He was brought before the king dressed in the most expensive clothes that this man had ever seen.

The king said to him, you are now welcome to come to my banquet. And furthermore you may keep these clothes, but I want you to know this, they will never ever wear out.

[29 : 05] man. Well, the man was excited about this and just as he was leaving, he turned around wearing these new clothes and saw the bundle of rags that were his.

And he went back and he bundled them up and he grabbed them and put them under his arm. The day of the banquet came round and the man went in his royal robes with his rags under his arm. He sat at the banqueting table and throughout the whole evening the most extraordinary foods were passed before him. And yet how much of the banquet he actually missed because all the while he was trying to balance these rags on his lap, hoping that nobody could see.

As years went by, the words of the king proved to be absolutely true. Those clothes never showed any sign of wear or tear. And yet wherever the man went, he always went with his rags, bundled up, tucked under his arm, such that he was only ever known, not as the man with the royal clothes, but the guy with the rags.

when we come to follow him, when we come to be with Jesus, to be in Christ and to know Christ in us, when we come to know his transformation, that's an eternity that starts now.

[30 : 45] Now, we are called to let go of that past, to not conform to the patterns of this world, but to be truly transformed, such that our focus is not on that which we've left behind, and is not on those patterns that surround us each day, and that would seek to form us in a particular way, but to dare to be different, to dare to dream, to dare to hope, to dare to believe that we are actually with Jesus, to not conform to the patterns of this world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds.

Let's pray right now that that can happen. Let's pray together. Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you that you come to us, not just for somebody to believe in, but somebody to live in.

Thank you that you clothe us in royal garments, that you invite us into that living, loving relationship that is a daily reality.

Help us, Lord, to focus not on the things around us, but on you, to be transformed, to be transfigured, to dare to live our lives as resurrection people, knowing that our future in you is certain.

And because that future is certain, so is the present. so transform, transfigure us, we pray, by the renewal of our minds, by the power of your Holy Spirit, in Jesus' name.

[32 : 54] Amen.