

How Does Scripture Change You?



by David Powlison

In the course of teaching and counseling, I have asked many people to talk or write about *how* God drew them to seek and know him, *how* he changed them. I ask them to describe, as far as it is possible, the significant and decisive factors.

In considering your growth as a Christian, who and what most influenced you? Almost invariably, people tell stories.

These stories exhibit common features: (1) a challenging, troubling, disorienting situation, and a sense of personal struggle with sins, disturbing emotions, confusion; (2) God's intervening voice and hand, via Scripture, often mediated through a godly person; and finally, (3) the way all these come together, by the grace of God, in a qualitative change in the one who bears witness. The person changes in some significant way: a new understanding of God, self, and situation; a change of heart; a turning to God in awakened faith; a recognition of God's providence in the situation; new actions of wisdom and obedience.

When souls are being cured, people bear witness to their external troubles, their internal struggles, and their God of active providence and relevant speech. Almost invariably, they specify how two means of grace served as vectors of their encouragement, instruction

and transformation: (1) the reorienting truth of a particular passage of Scripture; (2) the trustworthy love of a person who embodied Christ.

I ask people to further describe these two factors by working through two sets of questions. The first set of questions considers how God works through his words.

What passage of Scripture has proved most significant in your life? What passage is most meaningful to you? Why? What does it touch? Why does this particular revelation from and about God have such an impact? How do these words make a difference?

The second set of questions considers two different perspectives on how God works through his people.

Who do you most trust? What about this most trustworthy person earns your trust? What changed in you because of that person's influence? What are you able to talk about because you trust?

Both of these factors matter supremely in the change process, because God's truth is spoken and embodied by loving people.

This article will deal with the first set of questions, the effect of particular truth. A future article will consider the impact of loving, constructive people.

I will present and discuss two stories of change. These stories are typical in that they

David Powlison (M.Div., Ph.D.) teaches at CCEF and edits the "Journal of Biblical Counseling."

contain features that recur in every redemption story. They are idiosyncratic in that they demonstrate the individuality and local color of any good story. The details matter. Every person's story is significantly different. That's why "the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25). Yet the stories trace similar themes. Every

the church and become a drunk. But Jesus calls me to forgive from the heart. Mark 11:25 is open and shut about that. It's one of God's faithful commands. I know that's where I need to go, if I'm to come out of this as a constructive person, not destructive or self-destructive. And I'm getting there. God is faithful. *God... is... faithful.* Jesus truly forgives me when I struggle.

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person's story is similar. That's why each story tells "things that Jesus did" (John 21:25). Jesus infiltrates and rearranges every story, so that all of our stories are marked and shaped by his loving purposes.¹

Charles

Charles is a single man in his early 30s, a well-taught layman, active in his Asian-American church, a computer programmer by profession

He writes,

"Recently I have returned often to Ps 119:86: 'All your commandments are faithful; they persecute me with a lie; help me!' Immediately, it says to me that there is such a thing as *completely* and *always* trustworthy. Especially in recently experiencing being sinned against by broken trust, gossip, and betrayal... I cling to the truth that God is always trustworthy and what he says to me is trustworthy. He helps me to trust again. When I say, 'Help me!', I *know* I'm talking with my Father, even in the midst of facing broken trust from people who hurt me, who don't even think there's a problem, who don't even want to try to resolve it. It's like I'm dealing with a cover-up. Everybody seems to be avoiding what happened. When I try to bring it up, I'm viewed as the problem because I want to name and resolve what happened, not just pretend.

"It's so hard to forgive in this situation. It's easy to grumble inside, to get caught up in my dark, fiery emotions, to replay the video of what happened, to get bitter and paranoid around my group of friends. Sometimes I just pack it in and surf the web, checking out sports cars and ecotourist adventures. I have a new sympathy for why someone might just chuck

As I confess my bitterness and grumbling, he truly helps me. I need him to clear my head in order to sort out what I need to do next, and so I can do it in the right way and not just tangle things up more."

I think of such stories as catching the flash of a goldfinch on the wing. We are privileged to enter into a man's life as it is happening. What are we seeing and hearing? The passage Charles cites explicitly names a common life situation: mistreatment by the words of another person. Notice there's not necessarily a perfect 1:1 fit between this Scripture and Charles's life, but it's "close enough" to be relevant.² A subsequent conversation with Charles revealed what had happened. A longstanding friend and trusted confidant had betrayed trust. He had gossiped a sensitive confidence, degrading Charles in the eyes of their circle of fellowship. In the psalm, the persecutory liars are identified as enemies of both God and psalmist, people never to be trusted, who threaten literal death and destruction. In Charles's situation, the sense of threat—"death and destruction"—is metaphorical, a devastating estrangement in social relations. The pain and perplexity are aggravated because there had been real trust, and this trust was betrayed. The offense came not from an identified enemy, but from a brother in Christ who treated him in an enemy-like manner, and now tries to smooth it over by acting like nothing happened. The particular "lie" was actually a factual truth, but a true statement used maliciously becomes an expression of The Lie that threads through fallen humanity. The situational reference contained in Psalm 119:86 is appropriate and relevant, but Charles has intuitively done

something quite intricate in connecting it to what happened to him.

The internal struggle provoked by being sinned against is only implicit in the actual words of Psalm 119:86. But a sense of personal distress, affliction, temptation to reactive sin, and need for help are “obvious.” We know this from universal human experience, as implied in the cry for help, and as illustrated throughout Psalm 119. Charles legitimately reads his unhappiness and his problematic reactions back into the passage: “They persecute me with a lie” ...and I feel threatened, overwhelmed, hurt, frustrated in all my efforts, unhappy, and I am tempted to

of coming out into daylight as a constructive human being... but the verse easily bears such fine gifts to a man in his need.

Notice also how God’s revelation always attaches promises to his commands, and attaches commands to his promises. He gives us grace upon grace; he calls us to know him and become like him. In Charles’s story, the truths that echo in the background always tie trustworthy reasons to trustworthy commands.

- Forgive (command), as you have been forgiven in Christ (God’s person, work, promise).
- Take refuge (command) in your Rock and Shepherd who is a safe place for the

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be angry, fearful, escapist and mistrusting. We witness his version of the universal struggle with double evil: evils come upon us and evils come from within us. Mistreatment occasions many temptations, and Charles’s story candidly expresses his experience of trial and temptation. We witness—and feel—his need for help. His Scripture passage of choice comfortably contains many variations on the human theme, including his own.

And then there is the revelation of God. The Lord never tells all in any one moment of self-revelation. Various aspects of God’s person, purposes, character, will, promises and actions come onto the table in various portions of Scripture: always timely to the complexities of a particular situation, always pointedly appropriate to the perplexities of existential choice for a particular person or people.

Here in Psalm 119:86, we hear one truth and overhear another: God’s directive words are true and faithful, and he is a helper on whom the needy may call. In Charles’s story—again, a typical application of Scripture, generating encounter with God and ethical transformation—we hear not only the overt revelation in this one verse, but numerous echoes, connotations and allusions arising from the biblical back story. This wider context shapes his reception of Psalm 119:86. For example, the verse *per se* does not mention the Father, or the work of Jesus, or the forgiveness of our sins, or the command of Mark 11:25, or the goal

afflicted (a train of evocative reasons).

- Be an imitator (command) of God as a beloved child (a cornucopia of promise), and walk in love (command) as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma (the propitiatory burnt offering of the Lamb, whose fragrance soothes and pleases God).

In technical language, the indicative (what is true about and from God) always frames and drives the imperative (how we are to respond). Faith works through love.

Charles’s troubles and struggles come together with a revelation of who God is. Charles turns from the world of sin and death, to the God of grace and life. Charles turns and is still turning. A change occurs in Charles—and recurs. It is not one and done. Charles continues to engage his ongoing situation in the light and by the power of the Redeemer Lord. We hear faith working all through his story: “I have returned often... Immediately, it says to me... I cling ... He helps me to trust again. When I say to him, ‘Help me, I know I’m talking with my Father... I know that’s where I need to go... *God... is... faithful...* When I confess... he truly helps me.” Notice the active verbs, his italics, the immediacy of relationship.

So far, this example describes changes in Charles’ relationship with God. But he is in motion toward changes in how he relates to people. He is working out the “attitudinal”

forgiveness before God (Mark 11:25; Matt 6:9–15) that is the precondition for constructively approaching another person to work toward “transacted” forgiveness (Luke 17:3–4; Matt 18:15–17).

Note three further implications. First, Charles is changing, but there is no stasis. The story isn’t over. Ethical renewal is not idealized ethical perfection or moral self-improvement. There are people he must talk with. Much good has been happening, but the process is still going somewhere, and the outcome remains indeterminate. Charles is processing to the next phase of struggle. We rejoice at what we witness so far. But we sit on the edge of our chairs, waiting with eager longing to see if peacemakers will sow peace, bringing to further realization the ethical glory of the sons of God. What happens next is fraught with uncertainty. How will the former friend respond? How will the circle of friends respond? Will church leaders step in and help if the situation continues unresolved? Will Charles regress into bitterness, self-pity and fantasizing over Corvettes, or will he go forward in the light? His life is a holy experiment. The grace and goodness of God will finally triumph. But the glory is not yet fully apparent.

Second, cure of souls usually involves a different sort of ethical judgment than the analyses and judgments pertaining to depersonalized ethical cases and dilemmas. It calls for more than coming to a thoughtful Christian *position*; it calls for an ethic that’s on the move. Casuistic ethical discourse—e.g., abortion, just war, definition of marriage, grounds for divorce, medical decision-making—only occasionally touches down in daily pastoral care. Even casuistic analysis of matters immediately pertinent to Charles’ situation does not plumb the intricacies of personal and pastoral need: “How should a Christian respond to violation of trust by a brother?; When is church discipline appropriate and how should it proceed?” Such topical ethical judgments frame the cure of souls, but don’t carry it along. Luther cogently sets the Christian life *in motion* because of situational and personal realities:

This life, therefore, is not righteousness but growth in righteousness, not health but healing, not being but becoming, not

rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished but it is going on. This is not the end but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory but all is being purified.³

The Christian *position* sets boundary conditions and goals. The Christian *process* struggles forward amidst many variables and contingencies.

Third, the *triangulation* of change—the interplay between situation, personal struggle and living God—exposes the failures of typical pastoral counseling. Churchly advice often reduces the complex, unfolding dynamic of ethical transformation to a doctrinalistic, moralistic, or pietistic exhortation to “Just ____.” Here is some of what I’ve witnessed or read.

- Just remember God’s sovereignty.
- Just affirm that you’re a child of the King.
- Just get involved in a small group.
- Just get into an accountability relationship.
- Just give your troubles to Jesus.
- Just get into counseling.
- Just attend to the means of grace: preaching, sacrament and personal devotions.
- Just have a mountaintop experience.
- Just cast out the demon of bitterness.
- Just repent of bitterness and love your enemy.
- Just go to the person, and if he won’t listen, take one or two others with you that every charge may be established.
- Just take this key verse, Psalm 119:86, and pray the Ezer Prayer (“Help me”) every day, claiming your victory. This verse is the key that opens God’s storehouse of blessing. (OK, I made up this one. But its logic is for real.)

Some of this counsel contributes well when stripped of the simplistic “Just ____.” Some of these truth-bits function well as part of a larger whole. Other bits of counsel are nonsense, mystifying and misleading to both counselor and counsel-receiver. But none of these bits captures the reality of triangulation between external troubles, internal struggles and the active, hands-on, self-revealing Shepherd. None of these captures what actually helped Charles. They lack the feel for the process of living as a Christian, for what it is like to be a human being under the care of Christ. The ethical reorientation of a human being rarely comes through a pat

answer or quick fix. Charles illustrates something better, something richer, more human, more humane, true to Scripture and life.

Charlotte

My second example is more intricate biblically, richer experientially, and more complex situationally. Charlotte is a female seminary student in her mid-20s, single, with intuitive counseling skills. Let me set the stage by some comparison with the previous case study.

You will see that the similarities are basic: both reveal transformation. But the timeline for Charles's story was relatively short: an experience in the immediate past, still churning in the present, and calling for further action in the immediate future. Charlotte's story will come to a point in the present, but it reflects retrospectively on a long history.

Charles's story interacts with immediate situational stressors and immediate sinful responses. Charlotte wrestles with larger forces: longstanding patterns of how she comes at life; the fundamental discomfort of the human condition; contradictions operative in herself, in her experience of the church, and in relation to non-Christians.

The change process in Charles was linear: specifically sinned against, specific sinful responses, specific promise and command of God, transactions of repentance and faith... and an anticipation of very specific behavioral fruit. The changes you will see in Charlotte are more atmospheric, and she bears rich and complex fruit. We hear a particularly deep intimacy in her relationship to God. She makes one striking behavioral change. There are certain transformations that might be termed internal fruit: a subtle reorientation in how she understands herself, her situation, her God; a refinement in how her conscience functions; a linguistic richness that captures the poetry of experience, making her relationship with God come to life for us.

Here are her words.

"I've returned a lot to Isaiah 51. It reminds me that this world is not a 'comfortable' one, and assures me that Christ is the only true comfort (despite those things I try to fill in to comfort me instead).

I, I am he who comforts you. Who are you

that you are afraid of man who dies, of the son of man who is made like grass, and have forgotten the LORD, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, and you fear continually all the day.... I am the LORD your God, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—the LORD of hosts is his name. I have put my words in your mouth and covered you in the shadow of my hand, establishing the heavens and laying the foundations of the earth, and saying to Zion, 'You are my people.' (Isa 51:12–13, 15–16)

"This passage lends confidence to not be afraid of what those around me are thinking about me—freedom to live transparently. The awareness that I am always forgetting about God stings my cheeks. I'm an amnesiac to his sovereignty and grace in the world and in my life."

"These verses so insanely juxtapose and bind together the hugeness of Creator God and the close intimacy of Christ. He is incomprehensibly vast and powerful. He stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth; he stirs the roaring waves; he is LORD of hosts; and, again—in case I missed it the first time—he establishes the heavens and lays the foundations of the earth. In the exact same breath, he is wonderfully intimate. 'I, I am he who comforts.' I can't get over that double-I. He made me; he puts his very words in my mouth; his hand covers me; he says, 'You are my people.'

"Somehow life makes the MOST sense in the middle of this tension and seeming paradox of God's identity. I feel it on the deepest level of my relationship with God. I am also comforted when I see how this parallels other tensions, confusions and contradictions both around me and within me. God is not tidy, all black and white with straight-lines, fitting into a box—and neither am I—and knowing that is an affirmation and a comfort!

"I was always intimidated by people and their possible opinions of me. Last week in a missions class, I had to hold my tongue because I was dominating the conversation for most of the 3 hour discussion. It's all coming out, after being hemmed in by fear for all those years of awkward insecurity!"

My discussion will be briefer, as many of the points made about Charles are also applicable to Charlotte. For starters, savor this story as a story. There is more to it than my exploration can point out or capture. Notice the variety of situational troubles on the table. In the foreground: the potential disapproval of others in every social situation. In the wider context: this is an essentially uncomfortable world; some unspecified sense of “tensions, confusions and contradictions around me.” From conversation, I learned that Charlotte is alluding to brushing up against self-righteous pettiness in an ecclesiastical conflict, and to her encounter with theological dogmatism in hard-edged people who seemed not to understand God, or themselves, or others, or life. She is also alluding to the sense of contradiction she experiences when instances of hypocrisy and inhumanity in Christian people are juxtaposed with instances of honesty, care and humanity in non-Christians.

Notice the complexity of Charlotte’s inner, personal struggles. In the foreground: Charlotte’s atmospheric fear of man, shyness, social anxiety and withdrawal. In the background: discouragement and confusion in the face of both what is around her, and her inner struggles. She feels out of step with some of the comfortable verities of her evangelical subculture. She also alludes to the false comforts to which she turns as easy substitutes for Christ: self-medicating through food, exercise, friends and novels.

Notice the revelation of our Redeemer: this most magnificent, most comforting God of Isaiah 51. He tells her not to be afraid (the one command), which Charlotte intuitively extends to include its positive meanings: “Enter in. Get involved. Care. Speak up.” Isaiah 51 gives her a cascade of good reasons: the reproofs of 51:12 that sting her cheeks; the many wonders and intimacies that comfort her “on the deepest level.” Charlotte is a living demonstration of how faith and works co-operate in response to God’s vivid self-revelation.

As in the previous case study, the passage Charlotte mentions—ported forward from a very different redemptive-historical context, and personalized—seems uniquely appropriate. It is close enough for relevance. She reads and appropriates this passage by peopling it with

her own experience and by enriching it with echoes and allusions from the person and work of Christ.

Finally, notice the dynamic of change. God, the situation and the person triangulate in a context that had always been anxiety-producing and intimidating. A new and living reality emerges. A transformative engagement occurs between strong Savior and needy child: stinging cheeks at realizing her amnesia, the experience of deep comfort. The behavioral consequences are striking: new freedom to live and speak transparently, a conscience newly sensitized to the dangers of talking too much. Her newfound voice is particularly significant. Action registers that change is real.

Charlotte’s story also illustrates several other features of cure of souls. First, change is a lifelong process in which we witness thematic continuities. In the classroom incident, God was rescripting patterns that go back to childhood. Sin is usually not new-hatched; righteousness doesn’t fall like random fire from heaven. As you get to know a person, you learn to see patterns and themes in the interplay of existential and situational factors, just as students of Scripture learn to see patterns and themes in the Bible. It helps a person to know that the Vinedresser is pruning purposefully. It greatly helps all of us to know that God typically works on *something* specific, not everything at once.

Second, how is it that Charlotte and I view her “speaking up” as a fruit of the Spirit? That item is not on any list of fruits (though I think it’s implicitly among the “things like these” of Galatians 5:23). We know it is good fruit because we understand her situational troubles and personal struggles in the light of revelation. Fear of man coached Charlotte to stay in the background, to play it safe. In social groups, she was virtually a non-participant, unable to bring her thoughts to the point of joining in audibly. She was self-preoccupied, not loving. She was fearful, not free. As the fruit of repentance and faith, the Spirit freed her to participate. He loosens her tongue, because that is what love and obedience now look like in Charlotte’s life.

Third, Charlotte’s ironic, humorous sensibility of the need to hold her tongue captures other features of the Christian life. It’s evidence that her conscience is alive, sensitive, malleable. Such bursts of intuitive wisdom are unquantifiable,

unscriptable, electrifying—and are one aspect of ethical transformation into wisdom.

Fourth, needing to hold her tongue also illustrates how the cure of any living soul calls for continual course corrections. She finds her voice, and immediately realizes that there are sins of the tongue, and times when love quiets down and listens. It's a new lesson.

Fifth, in this ironic combination of learning to speak up and needing to quiet down, Charlotte is tasting the logic of Luther's curious exhortation, "Sin boldly!" Step out... and always be open to course corrections. Don't

forgiveness more often. She might sin "more," but she's actually sinning less, and growing up as a daughter of the King. She will always need course corrections.

God Works with Us

"God meets you where you are." That's a truism. But when you stop and ponder *how* that happens and *why* it happens, it is nothing less than light breaking into darkness. A sin-sick, life-bruised soul revives and begins to live. The Christian life is organically alive. We turn, we trust, we obey, we grow—interacting with

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let scrupulosity paralyze action. God's mercies are reliably "new every morning." Like a good father, his compassion and hands-on parenting continue through the ups and downs. The Christian life typically lurches forward, rather than marching in a straight line. The grace of Christ means a person can live life without paralyzing perfectionism and scrupulosity, and can cheerfully expect frequent course corrections. Charlotte has always held back in social settings. Now that she's beginning to speak up, she'll probably say things she regrets, or may find herself talking too much. It's safer to hang in the background and nod agreeably (cf., Pro 17:28 on the fool who keeps silent!). It's risky to mix it up. She'll make mistakes, even sinning verbally (James 3:2). Other people won't always agree with her if Charlotte doesn't seem to always agree with them. She'll have to learn to face and solve conflicts, rather than always avoiding conflict. She'll have to ask

what's happening around us, as the God of truth breaks in. He has gathered us to himself in a lifelong holy experiment in redemption. Charles and Charlotte teach us something of that dynamic.

1 Each is based primarily on one person's written story, slightly modified in three ways. First, identifying details have been altered. Second, I have supplemented the discussion with further knowledge gained in pastoral conversations. Third, I have woven in some particulars from other people whose experience was analogous, thus creating a composite case.

2 "Close enough" relevance is analogical relevance. This involves hermeneutical and ethical intricacies that are far easier to illustrate than to state. See John Frame's *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1987) for a careful discussion.

3 Martin Luther, "Defense and Explanation of All the Articles, 1521," (vol. 32 of *Luther's Works*, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1958), 24.