

# USE THE WORD – TRANSFORM

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2 Timothy 3:16-17 (MSG)

*Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.*

“Every part of Scripture!” That even includes the genealogies. Why? Because they’re so interesting? Because I recognize the names of my own family members? No. For none of those natural reasons.

Clearly, when the Hebrew tribes were carefully tracking their own ancestry, those lists held great meaning for them. But, what possible meaning can they have for us today? Well, let me highlight just two possibilities.

When David Wilkerson began reaching out to the members of New York City gangs and introducing them to the Bible, he probably didn’t consider the kind of impact those ancient stories might have until one gang member discovered his own name, Israel, written in the Bible—many times! “Hey! There’s my name! My name is in the Bible!” he exclaimed.

Matthew lists the generations from Abraham to Jesus. You may recognize a few of the names if you have read through the Old Testament before, but what is unusual about this list is its reference to five *women* (mothers). Stranger still, among them is the name of a *prostitute*, Rahab, who was the mother of Boaz.

Rahab first became famous when Joshua led a campaign against the walled city of Jericho. He sent two spies into the city, who spent the night in Rahab’s house. Acknowledging the power of the God of Israel, she offered to hide them and help them escape in return for her rescue, along with her household, when the army of Israel invaded the city.

Joshua 6:25 (NLT)

*So Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute and her relatives who were with her in the house, because she had hidden the spies Joshua sent to Jericho. And she lives among the Israelites to this day.*

She not only lived among them, she converted to their faith, married one of them, and gave birth to Boaz, who later became the husband of Ruth, and the great-grandfather of David, who became king of Israel. We know nothing more about Salmon, the man she married, but I suspect he was one of those two spies.

Here’s my point: If you have ever thought that you were a person of no account, just a face in the crowd, just a name on a long list, you may discover through the Bible that God has an amazing plan for your life—a plan that is not dependent on noble beginnings, and not limited by your past experiences.

1 Corinthians 1:27-29 (NJB)

*God chose those who by human standards are fools to shame the wise; he chose those who by human standards are weak to shame the strong,<sup>28</sup> those who by human standards are common and contemptible—indeed those who count for nothing—to reduce to nothing all those that do count for something,<sup>29</sup> so that no human being might feel boastful before God.*

This Bible is useful! It can show you what is true, show you how you’ve missed it, show you how to correct your mistakes, and show you how to maintain a life that pleases God. Don’t you *love* the Word of God?! It can transform your life.

Sure, read your devotionals and magazines and newspapers and novels, but reserve some everyday time for the Bible itself. Open the Book of books and let God speak into your life. His words are inspiring and life-giving. His Word will train you.

## Training for What?

We train for so many things in life. We train to speak. We train to read and write. We train to get along. We train to drive a car. We train for a career. We train for retirement. Above all those good things, we need most to train to live a life that pleases God.

Clear speech, good driving habits, and success in business do not, of themselves, please God. It is possible to have a wonderful life and still meet a bitter end. Yet, pleasing God *is* about discovering the very best that your life has to offer—in relationships, in careers, in significance, in lasting impact—and in the world to come, everlasting life.

So, in a very real sense we are training now *for eternity*. As Eleanor Powell said, “What we are is God’s gift to us; what we become is our gift to God.” Today, we are shaping our character and building our eternal future.

“Watch your thoughts, for they become words.  
Watch your words, for they become actions.  
Watch your actions, for they become habits.  
Watch your habits, for they become character.  
Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.”

A life that pleases God is not a gift that you receive from Him; it is an offering that you present to Him.

And when you think about what it takes to please God, don’t begin with the outward trappings: appearance, eloquence, or behavior. For, as God instructed Samuel, “The Lord doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 6:7).

In our recent study of 1 Peter 3, we discovered something that pleases God greatly: a “gentle and quiet spirit,” which means a spirit, or attitude, that is unperturbed, not easily upset, resting in the confidence that God has everything in His control. Peter instructs us to concentrate on developing and maintaining such a mind-set, because (regardless of its personal benefits) it is so precious to God.

Yet, when life takes a “wrong turn” and we suffer reverses or breakdowns or hardship, maintaining an attitude that is pleasing to God or even keeping God in all our thoughts may require major effort. For this we need training, lots of training.

In the sports, in the sciences, in law enforcement or the military, lots and lots of training is necessary to prepare us to succeed. Mere knowledge, even rote knowledge, is insufficient; we must train until our skills become second nature, until we can act appropriately without thinking, even when under pressure.

1 Corinthians 9:24-25 (NLT)

<sup>24</sup> *Don’t you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win!* <sup>25</sup> *Everyone who enters an athletic contest goes into strict training. They do it to win a temporary crown, but we do it to win one that will be permanent.*

Hebrews 12:1-2 (GWT)

<sup>1</sup> *Since we are surrounded by so many (people who are) examples [of faith], we must get rid of everything that slows us down, especially sin that distracts us. We must run the race that lies ahead of us and never give up.*

<sup>2</sup> *We must focus on Jesus, the source and goal of our faith.*

I hope one thing is becoming clear: While we are completely dependent on the Holy Spirit to transform us for His eternal purpose, He will not do it without our intentional cooperation. Some people imagine that they’ll simply limp along (spiritually) until Jesus returns and then, in the blink of an eye, He will complete the change in them. I have not found support for that in the Scriptures. We may call Him “Lord,” and we may call upon Him, “Lord, Lord,” but if we do not do the things He said, He will send us away.

You may never do what He has said perfectly or consistently, but you must earnestly try to do so persistently. Anything less than that is sham religion. And therefore, we need training, lots of training.

## Why Do I Need Training?

- You need training, because God's ways are beyond yours, and often contrary to your human nature.

Isaiah 55:8-9 (NLT)

<sup>8</sup> *"My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the Lord. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine."* <sup>9</sup> *For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.*

God is not like your "better self" or even your "best self"; He is wholly *other* than your self. He is divine; you are human. His weakest moment is infinitely stronger than your strongest moment. To become "like Him," which is His ultimate aim for us, is absolutely impossible for you to achieve. *He* can do it, and He will, but only with your cooperation, because He does not transform you by magic. God transforms you by growth—and that means slow and unsteady change, from the inside out.

Our thoughts and our ways must change. I cannot nurse the same old "stinkin' thinkin'" and expect to please God or to spend eternity with Him.

It is God's Word that reveals to me how God thinks. It is God's Word that trains me in new ways of thinking. Like new shoes, or new exercises, new ways of thinking may not feel comfortable at the start; they may seem awkward. But in time, with training, they may become second nature—your new nature and your new normal.

- You need training, because personal change is difficult.

Change is uncomfortable. Familiar things—even familiar pain or familiar brokenness—may seem preferable to change. Old habits die hard. Only training—intentional, repetitive training—can build new, more productive habits.

1 Timothy 4:14-16 (NLT)

<sup>14</sup> *Do not neglect the spiritual gift you received through the prophecy spoken over you when the elders of the church laid their hands on you.* <sup>15</sup> *Give your complete attention to these matters. Throw yourself into your tasks so that everyone will see your progress.* <sup>16</sup> *Keep a close watch on how you live and on your teaching. Stay true to what is right for the sake of your own salvation and the salvation of those who hear you.*

A gift may be received by prophetic impartation, but it will come to nothing unless you give it your "complete attention" and "throw yourself" into its progress. Your cooperation is essential to your spiritual growth.

- You need training, because some relapse is inevitable.

In order to survive relapse, you must first reconcile yourself to your weaknesses. Admit it! You are a flawed and broken human being. You are neither the worst nor the best of all people, but you are a person who needs God continually. As long as you walk in denial of your personal need for the mercies of God, you will have only hollow spiritual pride to show for it.

In order to survive relapse, you must learn to repent promptly and diligently. Don't wallow. Don't compare yourself with others. Don't slump into self-pity. Instead, call on the Lord, who is gracious and great. Confess your sin, receive His forgiveness, His cleansing, and His fresh strength.

In order to survive relapse, you must practice getting up and moving forward *before* you feel like it. This is an act of the will—an act of faith in God's grace. When you pray, believe that you receive His grace, and you shall have it.

## Training Works!

- Training is about maintenance. Spiritual training is about keeping what we have received from God.

Galatians 6:9 (LB)

*Let us not get tired of doing what is right, for after a while we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't get discouraged and give up.*

The fellowship of God's people encourages our faith to grow, but don't depend primarily on other people, for they are flawed and inconsistent, too. Above all, lean on God's Word.

God's Word lends great encouragement for this journey—through its characters, through its poetry, and through its precepts.

King David learned to *encourage himself* "in the Lord." Recalling the will of God, revisiting the words of God, reflecting on the works of God, and rejoicing in the wisdom of God will preserve your faith and courage and rebuild your confidence and hope.

- Training is about supporting progress—continuing progress.

We must grow, because we are not yet what we need to be. As Christians, we must grow up. However, we cannot grow ourselves.

1 Peter 2:2 (NLT)

<sup>2</sup> *Desire God's pure word as newborn babies desire milk. Then you will grow in your salvation.*

This great salvation is a *growing* experience. So far, you have only tasted it. There is so much more to come! We must grow into it.

We cannot grow ourselves, but we can support growth (by healthy practices), or we can hinder it (by unhealthy practices). Repetitive training in godly practices is what supports our spiritual growth. This begins in the Word of God.

- Training is about becoming fruitful (effective).

We must grow, in order to produce spiritual fruit. Immature trees produce no edible fruit. Immature Christians produce little fruit, too.

I love the fact that growth is natural; that is, God has built growth into His creation. Jesus described it this way:

Mark 4:26-28 (NLT)

<sup>26</sup> *This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. <sup>27</sup> Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.*

Growth is God's work. It happens in secret. It happens without effort from us. But it does not happen *without us*. Someone must till the soil. Someone must sow the seeds. Someone must bury the seeds, and water the seeds. Someone must protect the seeds and the seedlings. Reflecting on his own ministry, Paul summed up this process:

1 Corinthians 3:6 (NLT)

<sup>6</sup> *I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow.*

We are growing up, in God's way; and we are growing up, *into* God's way. The process by which we grow is prescribed by Him: through the Word of God. And the result of that process is a life that expresses God's way, a life that is pleasing to Him.

Romans 12:2 (NLT)

*<sup>2</sup> Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.*

The Word of God is living and powerful and precise (Hebrews 4:12). By it, God:

- Shows us what is true
- Shows us what we have done wrong
- Shows us how to get back on our feet
- Shows us how to stay in the race until we win

God uses His Word to prepare and equip His people to do every good work that He has appointed for them (2 Timothy 3:17; NLT). You can be transformed by the power of God's Word. It is happening in this very room, at this very moment!

All it requires is your willing and persistent participation. Will you give yourself to it?