

## CHRISTMAS' TRANSFORMING STORY:

Through Joy, Pain or Sorrow

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Greetings to all during this holy season. Throughout the Bible we see a pattern where God has always desired a place to dwell among His people. He took this concept to its fullest in the New Testament when Jesus walked the earth. It culminates within the pages of the last book of the Bible, the Revelation of Jesus Christ. It's there that we see no need for a temple because the Lord is the Temple. To get us from point A to Z or from Alpha to Omega, we have to look at some key foundational concepts. One important reality is that each person is an individual as God moves in different timeframes, instilling different lessons for different people. Equally important are the timeless lessons we all eventually have to learn, regardless of the era, pattern or manner of teaching God employs to get us there.

One of the first lessons learned from our Bibles is that God never uses disaster to teach us a lesson. Unfortunately, the Earth is still subject to demonic interference: Evil in all its forms, both natural and manmade. That was not part of God's design; nevertheless, He's not beyond teaching us how to overcome these disasters when they occur. When God created Adam and Eve He gave them authority and freewill. All they had to do was learn sovereignty; or said another way, how to rule and reign God's way. By partaking of the fruit of the tree, Adam basically said to God: "No, I like my own way." God did not deny Adam this choice, but He also did not deny Adam the consequences of that choice. That choice allowed satan reign in a world he originally had no authority in. As a result, catastrophe, disaster

and heartache became a part of mankind's reality because sin was now introduced onto planet Earth.

Many the world over have experienced catastrophic disasters making many turn their thoughts toward the Lord or attempt to ignore Him totally. There really is no middle ground. A disaster either draws your attention toward the Lord or causes you to run the other way. This conscious or unconscious reaction usually starts to take place when the immediate danger has passed and the recovery process starts. Frequently that's because you have more time to think after the fight or flight mechanisms have returned to a status quo level.

For many of us who take Jesus' words literally that He never leaves us nor forsakes us, we have a conscious awareness of Him during the catastrophe. Think back to the last heartache or experience of woe you may have had: the death of a loved one, a natural disaster that blew house and home away, et cetera. If your response was to turn toward the Lord, you might have felt as if the Lord was redirecting your steps or taking you back to square one, maybe even fulfilling a promise made and using the disaster event to get you there faster. Not all disasters do that, but sometimes He does allow that to happen with certain events.

For those that get directed back to 'Square One,' there are examples in the Bible proving the starting point is always synonymous with God and His Word. There is an old saying among atheists that if you can believe the first sentence in the Bible, you can believe the whole book and all the implications that stem from it. How interesting that even diehard unbelievers

realize that if there is a “square one” from the Bible, it has to be in the beginning with God and His Word. The New Testament starts off with the revelatory and prophetic word of God becoming flesh, now becoming a Living Word mankind can see and hear. It’s this Living Word who was sent to planet Earth to overcome the disastrous choice Adam made in the beginning.

For those of us who have given our lives to Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit enables us to hear and have the revelatory word of God downloaded, as it were, into our spirit being. The more we read of God’s word, the more we hear, the more is downloaded. Our choices affect our outcomes. This is one of the ways Jesus becoming flesh changes our realities regardless of the circumstances we are surrounded by.

The more challenging reality is that as human beings, with or without the blood of Jesus infusing our mortal shells, we sometimes don’t listen. Many either ignore what’s said, misconstrue what’s been said or just don’t understand it, so we draw conclusions that border on misconstruction and error. This is exactly why the Holy Spirit must help our weaknesses (Romans 8:26, 27). It is also why it is so dangerous when Christian groups minimize the effectiveness of the Holy Spirit by eliminating His gifts from their teachings, thus reducing the ability to hear Him by their members.

When we place God in our boxes, we reduce our ability to see or hear Him outside of that box. Whenever I’ve been asked the question as to whether or not something is possible for God to do, my response has always been, “Do you see the same

situation or concept of Him doing this in the Bible?” As far as I’m concerned, if it’s in the book, and God has done it before, He certainly can do it again. As to whether He will answer our prayers and do a certain thing, depends on whether you get a yes, no, wait or some other answer from God. Frequently that can depend upon whether you can actually hear the voice of God.

In order to hear from God it’s important to be reading His word, or at the very least, you have to be talking to Him. Talking to God and Him answering back is what we term as prayer. All throughout the Scriptures the pattern has always been that when you approach the Lord in the manner in which He directs us to, He will always answer our prayer. In the Old Testament God spoke to many different people, but He spoke and had dealings primarily with the seed of Abraham and specifically with the Jewish people. Quite often, this had to do with some disaster Israel’s neighbors were inflicting on her, or some other catastrophic event.

Once Messiah came on the scene, His pattern for our New Testament experience is to always direct us toward a saving relationship with Jesus Christ (Romans 10:9, 10). Once that occurs, He promises to speak regularly to His people. Our ruler or measuring stick for what we hear from God, as well as whether we can hear from Him at all is the written word of God, contained within the pages of the Old and New Testaments.

As for other writings of the early saints, they may contain the words of God spoken to them and they may also contain things

that are not pertinent to us today. The Lord may very well use one of these writings to convey a concept to us. Certainly we can and should learn from them. The early church experienced persecution and heartache in ways we can sometimes forget today. The lessons they learned in taking the world for Christ are invaluable in today's world. Nevertheless, for our immediate discussions we will focus on the Old and New Testaments.

From Genesis on, the first lesson we come away with when we read the Scriptures is that God speaks and He also speaks to the humans He created, regardless of their language, age, nationality, cultural heritage or gender. As we proceed throughout the Old and New Testaments we see five avenues in which He uniquely speaks to people. The first is by the word, whether written or otherwise (see Daniel 9:1, 2, where Daniel read Jeremiah's writings to receive his word from the Lord). How often have we read the Bible only to be struck by a strong impression that what we were reading was a specific word to our own hearts through the written word of God?

The second is through the Holy Spirit as a word or impression by God spoken directly to our own hearts (see Ezekiel 7:1, where the Lord speaks directly to the prophet). The third is by a dream or vision, which for our purposes in this article we will place dreams and visions as one category. In Acts 10:9-17, Peter has a vision that confirms to him ahead of time that he should go to Cornelius' house. In Matthew 1:20 and 2:13, we see both occasions where Joseph is given a dream in which an angel speaks to him.

The fourth is by an angel outright. In Luke 1:26-38, an angel appears directly to Mary and has a dialog with her and she with him. The fifth or the last is by the mouth of another human being, either as a prophetic word, whether they are an established prophet or not, or from the preaching or teaching of a minister, whether spoken or written (see 1 Chronicles 21:9-12; Matthew 24:1, 2; Acts 14 & 15:22-35).

We only have to look at the life of Abraham to find all of these avenues being exercised by the Lord. God first tells Abraham to leave his home and country for a land that God would give him and the nation that Abraham would produce by the promise of God. This has been recorded for us in Genesis 12:1-4, with the record of Abraham's life in chapters 12 through 25. Later on Abraham needs some encouragement and God shows up in a vision, in some way conveying the picture of a shield and says, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great" (Genesis 15:1). Later God puts Abraham into a deep sleep and gives him a dream (Genesis 15:12-21). God has also spoken to him through the mouth of a priest by the name of Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20). After many years, and several mistakes on Abraham's part, God then sends angels, showing up Himself as one and speaking with him and Sarah (Genesis 18). In Genesis 17 the Lord appears to Abram and speaks to him directly.

Many of you will say that I have missed one of the ways God speaks and that is through circumstances or different events. As I mentioned in the beginning of this article, God will and can speak through circumstances. There is a reason why I do not list

it here. In many cases human beings will initiate a series of events that God has nothing to do with. For instance, the warming of our oceans may be a natural cycle that the earth goes through or may be the result of our ever increasing pollution of the planet or may be a combination of both. Storms that result from this may be the natural outcome, or may come from spiritual events that we do not see. The devil will use such a circumstance to try to get his counter-message across. God usually gets the blame for such events. The devil has been trying to corrupt God's word for millennia.

While God has been known to use natural events to catch man's attention or redirect his path— for instance, Moses and the burning bush— He'll use such a circumstance to then speak directly to us within the context of these five avenues. I'm often reminded of the prophet Elijah when he discovered that God was not in the wind, the earthquake or the fire, but it was only the still, small voice that was God (1 Kings 19:9-13). Quite frequently, we feel the disaster was God speaking. It is not: He's in that still, small voice we strain to hear after those events.

Hebrews 1:1 says that God "spoke long ago to the fathers and the prophets in many portions and in many ways" (the writer then goes on to talk about God now speaking through His Son). Jeremiah said that he felt the word of the Lord as a fire burning in his bones (Jeremiah 20:9). David wrote in Psalm 29 that he felt or received the Lord's voice in this manner: "The voice of the Lord is powerful. The voice of the Lord is majestic. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars....The voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning. The voice of the Lord shakes

the desert....” In John’s case in the book of Revelation, he said Jesus’ voice was like the sound of many waters (Revelation 1:15). Whatever the experience that we have when we receive the word of the Lord, whether by a powerful expression of the Holy Spirit, as Jeremiah had, or by the word of the Lord coming to us directly, one of these five avenues will be employed, outside of whatever circumstance that was used to get us there.

As to whether God has the ability to speak to us today, a person’s belief system falls into one of two categories. Either God speaks to them today or He does not. I hope my previous Bible examples proves that He does speak today. Just in case you’re still having a hard time believing, Jesus said: “For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them” (Matthew 18:20). The Lord also said that He would never leave us nor forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6; Hebrews 13:5).

Since the Lord made these promises, and we are commanded to have fellowship with Him, then how is it possible to continue the relationship if He no longer can or is willing to talk to us? Believe it or not, it’s usually not the folks who don’t believe God can speak today that I worry about when we talk about this subject. It is easy enough to show them from the word instances in which Jesus promised to be with us and commune with us (John 10:5, 27; John 14:11-14, 20-27). Next, I just pray for them and ask the Holy Spirit to lead and guide them. It doesn’t take long before they come back and relate an instance where they felt they received an answer to prayer.



The reason why I worry more for those who believe God does speak today is because we can become too flippant with the voice of God and forget the standards and parameters in which God speaks. The Lord's voice is perfect, our hearing and more often our interpretation is not. Emotions and tragedy, even long term bliss can hinder our human hearing. For those of us who believe that God speaks to His people today, we would do well to keep these five parameters in mind and line up what we hear with the written word of God on a continual basis. I've had people tell me a vision or a word was from God when it was in direct conflict with the written word of God. That's the measuring stick we use when thoughts or impressions come to us. This brings me to a very specific guideline that God uses when He speaks.

The Bible says clearly that it is through the mouth of two or three witnesses that a thing should be confirmed (Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15; Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19; Hebrews 10:28). I can't count how many times people have told me God told them to quit their job or do something else that seemed in conflict with the written word, but actually was not.

One year I can remember a brother in the Lord ask me whether God would tell him to quit his job since he had responsibilities that would not be met if he did. We went back to the word and discovered that God asked some pretty heavy things of some of His saints, but He always came through for them on the other side of the test or storm. I'm reminded of Abraham, Moses and Esther, to name a few. Since we saw in the written word that the

present word to this man's heart was not in conflict, then my only question was, was he absolutely sure that it was God; because if it was, it would have to be confirmed by the mouth of two or three witnesses.

Well, as he told the story, it had been confirmed by a prophet that spoke to this man out of the clear blue, with absolutely no prompting whatsoever. Since the man felt it was God's voice and it was absolutely confirmed by the mouth of two witnesses, then I counseled him that the only thing lacking was his faith. If he acted on the word of God spoken to his heart by faith, God would see him through. Well, I'm happy to report that God did see him through. If we would function within the parameters of the written word of God, confirming what we hear with the written word, and then giving the Lord the time to confirm what we hear by at least two or three witnesses, our lives would be made easier.

If you get used to filtering what you hear from the Lord through the written word, it becomes second nature for you to do as you listen. There are three other parameters that I have seen and can be applied to every word God has spoken to every individual within the Bible's pages. Here are the three: context, purpose and content. Pick any prophet or New Testament saint and analyze the word spoken to them. To discern what the Lord might be saying, look at the historical and personal context in which God was speaking to them, then step back and study the content.

Did the content line up with previous Scripture and what was the relationship between the content of what was said and the historical or personal context in which it was spoken? By that time the purpose for why the Lord spoke it should be revealed. We can do the same with any word spoken to us personally. If you are a new believer or somewhat new at hearing the voice of God, start to pass what you hear through these parameters. It won't be long before it becomes second nature to you and you begin to hear the Lord more clearly as you walk with Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Of course there are people that emotionally are not disciplined enough to function this way. Sometimes actual mental illness is the cause, or deep seated soul issues are hindering their walk with the Lord in this manner. Sometimes a moment of heartache and/or catastrophe have occurred, making lives an emotional train wreck. My experience in helping with both groups of people is the ever-healing nature of the risen Christ. That may sound super-spiritual, but it is found in the simple and somewhat tedious everyday disciplines of getting trained medical help when necessary, combined with simple Bible studies on a daily basis.

For the first group with diagnosed mental issues, this means doing what licensed doctors have told them to do. For those experiencing a moment of hell on earth, sometimes a support group of people who have experienced the same hell and have come out on the other side can help; or possibly a good construction crew donated by a charitable organization can be the Godsend when finances or insurance fail us.

There is a harder task of convincing the person that what they are feeling or hearing is not the condemnation of the Holy Spirit, but their own soul issues taking over. This eye-opening revelation can be retold by a human mouth, but is best experienced by the Holy Spirit. For those who believe they hear perfectly, and probably do, but then misconstrue what's been said, it usually has to do with pride and self-centeredness, combined with an unwillingness to deal with those soul-based issues.

Sometimes we are not willing to take the time to wait on the Lord. We want the pain and suffering gone. Unfortunately, disasters can happen in a moment of time, but healing can be a journey through time. This leads me to the real problem that we all have, and that is making the time to be with the Lord. The best listeners are those people that take time, or make the time to privately read the word, sing to the Lord or just pray and talk to Him regularly.

In many cultures of the world there are so many voices and events that distract us. In some places it is a religion that seems so true, yet is so counter-productive to God's message of salvation. In other places it is the pretty lights of a city billboard, shopping mall or movie theatre. All of us can feel the pressure of work, family and providing for that family which can distract us and consume our short reserves of minutes in the day. There is no easy way to wake up earlier, or edge out the radio in the car to listen to biblically inspired songs, messages or texts. You either will do these things or you will not. The question can be

asked that if we, no matter what field of interest we are in, can be changed by listening or being around the genius of that field of interest, or a person of greater knowledge than ourselves for an hour, what profit can we gain by being around the Lord of lords and King of the Universe for 5, 10, 15 or 60 minutes out of the day?

There is one last test, and two other guides that the New Testament specifically gives us to help us with what we hear the Lord say. Jesus said in John 14:27: "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you." Paul writes in Colossians 3:15: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace." He also says to the Philippians: "The peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7). It seems to me that what you hear will leave you with a peace that is a supernatural gift given by Jesus. Even if He tells you to make a hard decision that goes beyond your natural comprehension, you will feel one with Him and that peace will guard and protect you. If you have no peace concerning a situation, God is not in it.

Another good guide is obedience. If you are obedient to what you hear the Lord tell you to do, His peace will follow you. If we enter into unbelief or disobedience or if we follow the voice of someone else, God's peace will begin to dissolve. This dissolution might take some time, but after a while you begin to realize that you are no longer walking in a peaceful situation. Ask the Lord where you have lost your peace. Usually the

answer is right in front of you. He will speak to you if you give Him the time.

One last guide that can become a great test is the local congregation of the Lord and/or someone whom you view has disciplined you in some things concerning Christ and/or the greater church at large. Let me explain what I mean. Paul gave us some basic principles for the local congregation to test what they hear when they are in some kind of a meeting. “Of the prophets, two or three may speak, while the rest exercise their judgment upon what is said” (1 Corinthians 14:29).

This is not only for a worship service but any gathering in which the saints are listening for direction. He also told the Thessalonians: “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good” (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). By reading these two verses within the context of the books and history in which they were written, we see that how a church handles what they hear is extremely important. To exercise judgment means to investigate, interrogate or to determine. The local church is to test the word given to it and to extenuate the positive and eliminate the negative. The person who is in charge of your discipleship should do the same.

As concerning the broader church at large outside of your own denomination, which also extends to searching out past church history, there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9). If you are hearing something from the Lord that is false, this falsity has been spoken before. You should be able to see how the

church elders handled it before, whether within your own denomination or outside of it. If it is a truth that your particular denomination shuns, yet is from the word of God, then leaders from outside your denomination will be able to help you with what you are hearing. The reason why I place the believers in both the category of guide and test is because sometimes that is what happens. The Lord may use your local congregation to test your obedience or He may use them as a guide to confirm what you are hearing and help you with your interpretation of what you hear.

There is a place where the guidance of your local congregation or elder is not applicable. I don't always like to talk about it, but if you go to a church or congregation that is not unified or they are into some kind of gossip or position grabbing, that place is not a peaceful place. They have lost the peace of Christ and you probably will not be able to get an honest answer to the questions you may have concerning what you have heard from the Lord. You will probably at that point have to go outside your congregation to another denomination or group of believers. You may not even know that you are attending such a place. With very large churches it is difficult to know. A good guideline is how they receive a word. If they receive a word from the Lord and do not follow the guidelines that Paul outlined that we saw previously in Corinthians and Thessalonians, and they respond to that word with intimidation or negativity toward those sharing, it probably is not a peaceful place.

This may sound small, but the testimony of two or three witnesses is also repeated by Paul to the Corinthians and should

also be a guide for you. If only one prophet shares a word constantly or only one individual shares a word of knowledge or wisdom from the Lord on a regular basis during a gathering—especially if it is the same person all the time, with no others sharing—whether it is for business or some other meeting, then that is also a sign that the church is in some kind of distress. I have never shared a word with a leader, individual or congregation that the Lord had not already shared with them, or brought along at least one or two others after me to share the exact same word. In other words, I have never seen Him not bring at least two witnesses to confirm a word or have at least two or three share a prophetic utterance to a church in good health.

For some of you this may seem very basic and something that you function in on a daily basis with the Lord. In that case you are probably ministering the health and vitality of Christ to someone in some capacity in your daily life. For others this may seem too disciplined and restrictive. I will say this, every time someone felt that way after I have shared these basic principles of hearing God from the Bible, yet they pressed on and became more disciplined in this area, they have always had a testimony later on of hearing God more clearly and with a greater level of faith and love toward Christ.

And isn't that what it's all about? Our love for Jesus should ever grow while faith blossoms and His peace reigns in our hearts. That does not have to be controlled by events or emotions, whether good or bad. The angels announced His birth by a proclamation of peace and the shepherds tending the flocks in



the fields that night gladly heard it with wonder and faith. It was not an easy experience. At first appearance of the announcing angel, they were filled with fear; but, the angel told them not to be afraid, that good news and great joy was for all. He told them exactly where to find the child, accompanied by a chorus of the heavenly host. And off those shepherds went in obedience and faith, announcing the miracle of what they heard and saw.

And so the same pattern has been repeated down through the centuries: Mankind has been busy in his own life with care, joy or sorrow when the Lord speaks; and yet we can hear, and potentially go off telling a message of overcoming through joy, pain or sorrow. This brings glory, joy and peace for all mankind, bringing the very habitation of God to a darkened planet. It's the singular message from that old English story: "Merry Christ's mass to all, and to all, a good night!"

\*\*An addendum: During this hectic time of the year, you may feel depressed or sad. I exhort you to ask Jesus to come into your heart. Do what Romans 10:9-13 says: "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed. For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."