

Welcome

What is the goal of faith?

I was born and raised in church, and if you had asked me that question growing up, I think I would have said, “going to heaven when you die.” Then, if you asked me what that entailed, I’d have likely said, “Asking Jesus into your heart and believing the right things.”

This stayed with me through my college years - I had one class on Spiritual Formation that was about how to get married, and then my religion classes were all about how to read the Bible better. Know more facts.

It wasn’t until I was in grad school I began to realize this might not be the sum total of faith. I didn’t go to a seminary. I went to the University of Missouri - a state university where the religion department wasn’t interested in training ministers. It was a more anthropological and sociological approach to religion. Less than half of the other students in my program were Christians. Many were atheist or agnostic.

I was discussing some issue with one of them - I couldn’t tell you now what - and I said, “Well the Bible says...”

My friend looked at me and said, “I don’t care what the Bible says.”

This was an explosion in my brain. At my Christian school, that’s how you won an argument! You stood there and threw bible verses at each other until someone ran out!

But here was a person who didn’t care how much I knew about the Bible, who didn’t value the same things I did. It was about that same time I started as a youth pastor. My first several lessons were deep, theologically rich... and completely irrelevant to my students.

It was in those moments something began to shift for me. I realized that knowing the Bible didn’t do much for me in that conversation with my friend. Or in the lives of my students. It was the first time I really *felt* the difference between knowing *about* God and *knowing* God.

I want to talk about that difference today. Because the goal of faith isn’t going to heaven when we die. It’s being changed, transformed. From death to live. Like being born all over again. Not for afterlife, but for today!

Message

In these final weeks before Advent, we’re revisiting our core values. Our series is called *Church of Theseus*, which is a callback to an ancient thought experiment. Imagine a man named Theseus owns a ship. Over the years, as he works to maintain the ship, he eventually replaces

every part - the mast, the sails, the planks in the deck and the hull. Years later, after every single piece of original wood has been replaced, the question is: is this still the ship of Theseus?

We could ask the same question of Catalyst: our staff is wholly different from a decade ago. Much of the congregation has changed. Even the place we gather is different - we used to meet in living rooms and movie theaters and even other church buildings! It's worth asking: are we still the same church God planted in Rowlett all those years ago?

We're answering that question with a resounding YES! Though our congregation has changed over the years, the same God who planted us and called us is still with us, leading us through the future.

For a long time here at Catalyst, we've reserved the last few weeks before Advent begins to explore our core values. And even those have changed - they were once Love, Grow and Serve. But several years ago, our leadership recognized that Catalyst has grown and changed, and it was time to set new core values, too.

So we spent two months in Journey to Love, exploring that first core value of Friendship. Here at Catalyst, we believe Friendship is the heart of Jesus' good news proclamation, so we spent two months exploring how God's love transforms us into friends with God and friends with each other.

Then last week, the newest member of our Preaching Team, Sonya Brown, explored our second Core Value, *Diversity*. (And Sonya is one of our virtual members - she and her son live in KC. One more way Catalyst is different than we used to be!)

Today, we're exploring our third core value, *Discipleship*. That's a fancy word for "learning to follow Jesus". We might want to use the word 'transformation' instead.

One of the big mistakes we make in following Jesus is that we think of it primarily as an intellectual exercise. We treat the Bible like a textbook, full of facts we need to know. Who had the ark? How many Commandments? Can you name them? Who are the 12 tribes? 12 Disciples? We attend bible studies that pick books apart word by word, deep diving into author's intent and more.

And y'all know I *love* that sort of thing. But too often, our study of Scripture stops there. At more knowledge. As if the goal of faith is to know more about God. But here at Catalyst, we recognize that faith isn't an exam we study to pass. Faith is a relationship - a friendship with God and with one another. Faith is something we grow into, and it's a process of transformation.

Paul describes the difference as a whole new creation in 2 Corinthians:

I am saying that anyone who has been joined together with the Chosen One is now part of the new creation. For in the Chosen One the old creation has faded away and the new creation has come into being. -- 2 Corinthians 5:17 (FNV)

This is really important: a life of faith isn't a tweak to our lives. It's a whole new life. It's so dramatic, it's like being born a second time.

Turn with us to [John 3](#).

This is early in John's story of Jesus. Jesus has just begun his public ministry, and in John's gospel, he did so by performing an act of public, civil disobedience - he cleansed the Temple.

Remember during the BLM protests when people would lay down in malls during Christmas shopping season, or block highways to shut down traffic? Peaceful, but very disruptive protests.

That's a lot like what Jesus did at the Temple. It was during Passover, and he disrupted the sale of animals for sacrifices. He created a disruption in a public space to illustrate that the good news he was announcing required a response. You couldn't listen to him and go about business as usual. You had to hear and change or ignore him.

One of the religious leaders wasn't content just to condemn Jesus as a trouble maker or rabble rouser or Marxist (just kidding Marx hadn't been born yet!). He saw something in Jesus' demonstration that rang true to him. But he was in the minority, so he sneaked out to see Jesus in secret.

Here's the dynamic you need to keep in mind as we read this: that scholar, Nicodemus, was about as wealthy, educated and powerful as a Jewish man could be in his day. He was one of the Pharisees and he sat on the ruling council.

Jesus, on the other hand, was from Nazareth, which in that day was sort of like backwoods Mississippi. He was a country preacher from the sticks. Never went to seminary.

Nicodemus was an elite Sunday School graduate. Now let's hear his encounter with Jesus:

A man named Conquers the People Nicodemus came to Creator Sets Free Jesus in secret at night. He was one of the Separated Ones Pharisees and a headman of the tribes of Wrestles with Creator Israel who sat in the Great Council.

Out of the shadows he whispered, "Wisdomkeeper, we know the Great Spirit sent you to teach us. No one can perform powerful signs like these unless the Maker of Life walks with him."

"I speak from my heart," Creator Sets Free Jesus answered, "Only one who has been born from above can see Creator's good road."

Conquers the People Nicodemus was surprised by this strange answer, so he asked, "Can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter his mother's womb to be born a second time?" -- John 3:1-4 (FNV)

Jesus' language here is super-familiar. You don't have to be a long-time Christian to know the phrase 'born again' - though that phrase was actually made popular relatively recently, by President Jimmy Carter.

Try to put aside your familiarity with the phrase and hear what Jesus is saying to this learned, educated man:

If you want to follow my teachings, if you want to be part of this new thing I'm doing, it's disruptive. What I did yesterday in the Temple was just a sign, pointing at this deep change. I'm inviting you to a wholesale transformation.

It's as radical as starting over from scratch. It's like you go back to being a baby and learning everything all over again - how to walk. How to talk. How to relate with the world. *Everything* you think you know is wrong, insufficient.

No wonder Nicodemus is incredulous.

Can you imagine being a person of his stature? The respect he commands? The power he wields? People look to him for advice, wisdom, insight. They crave his company. He's a guest at all the most desirable tables.

And Jesus is telling him none of that matters. He's missed God completely.

Again, to Nicodemus' credit, he doesn't just reject Jesus out of hand. He asks for an explanation. Jesus elaborates - though it remains confusing for poor Nicodemus:

“Listen closely,” Creator Sets Free Jesus answered. “One must be born of both water and spirit to walk Creator’s good road. The human body only gives birth to natural life, but it takes the Spirit of Creator to give birth to spiritual life. Do not be surprised that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ Everyone born in this way is like the wind that blows wherever it wants. You can hear its sound, but no one knows where it comes from or where it goes.” -- John 3:5–8 (FNV)

Jesus insists we must be ‘born of the Spirit’, which he warns is unpredictable. Because the one at the heart of this transformation is none other than the very Spirit of God. Jesus is using language here that echoes the creation story in [Genesis 1](#), where God's Spirit blows like a wind across the primordial waters of chaos, shaping and forming them into a world God can share with us.

So too, Jesus insists, we must allow God's Spirit to blow through our lives, recreating us - that new creation Paul promised the Corinthians.

I was hanging out with some friends recently who grew up in church but don't consider themselves Christians these days. They were asking about Catalyst, and specifically about how I preach. They reflected that the church in which they were raised had a terrific, charismatic pastor whose sermons were, according to them, basically hour-long seminary lectures.

Is that how I preach?, they asked.

I said, no, most certainly not. Our sermons here at Catalyst are maybe 30 minutes, including the welcome and time of response. We work hard to be sure our sermons are proclamations - announcements of what's good about Jesus' new way of life.

We work hard to be sure our sermons aren't lectures.

Because, as Nicodemus demonstrates, knowledge isn't the path to Jesus. Love is. Relationship is. And we can know an awful lot about God without actually *knowing* God (in the same way I spent a lot of time as a kid studying the moon without ever going to the moon).

So what we focus on in our preaching here at Catalyst is invitation to transformation. We make space for reflection and response. We work to create a space for you to say Yes to God's Spirit blowing through your life.

It's why our c-groups aren't bible studies. Instead, they're relationally-driven. We discuss the sermons or a book we're reading together or books of the Bible. But the focus isn't on all getting smarter, learning more information. It's about learning from each other, hearing what the Spirit is doing in your life - and maybe learning a little more about how the Spirit is working in and around me.

And it's why we have our spiritual practice guides - if you've used them, you know they're pretty light on information. They're designed to be very practical how-to guides to the spiritual practices that help us make space to sit with God's Spirit.

If I'm being honest, I wish a lot of times that the Spirit were more predictable. I wish I could say, "Here are five steps to a happy relationship," or "This is the clear path to your calling."

But as Jesus warned Nicodemus, the Spirit doesn't work like that. The Spirit is a wind, blowing wherever she wants, not asking our permission.

We live in a world obsessed with transformation. We fill our lives with books and gurus and plans and memberships all designed to help us become the person we think we should be.

It seems like the last thing we'll do is stop and clear space to sit and listen for the small, gentle voice of God's Holy Spirit inviting us to be changed.

Friends: knowledge didn't make the difference for Nicodemus. It took a face-to-face encounter with Jesus to begin his transformation (and, if you read the rest of John's Gospel, you see it still takes Nicodemus a while to find his way to faith, but he gets there because he keeps seeking).

Knowing a lot about Jesus didn't make the difference for me, either. It wasn't until a guy named Jonathan joined the staff at my last church. Jonathan brought with him the language of Spiritual Formation and spiritual practices - language that helped me understand better the goal of faith. Jonathan always said the goal is 'being formed in the image of Jesus for the sake of the world.' I love that language, and he helped guide me

Jonathan pastors another Nazarene Church over in East Dallas now (we just had lunch this week, as a matter of fact!), and I still enjoy receiving his wisdom, sharing how Jesus continues to shape us for the good not just of ourselves and our households, but for our congregations and for our communities.

It's not glamorous or flashy. It's quiet and slow and gentle. And yet it is what has kept me here at Catalyst over the last seven years. God's continued work in my life is what gives me hope as we look to our future. Not a future full of bible nerds who slay at a trivia night, but a congregation

of people who look more and more like Jesus and make a measurable, God-honoring difference in our community.

Friends, we can know everything about God and still not be transformed. Jesus' good news isn't a function of IQ. It's a question of whether we are making space to know him through the power of his Holy Spirit.

The same Spirit that blew across the waters of chaos still blows today through the chaos of our world. If we will pause and turn into that holy wind, we find peace and hope.

The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead still works resurrection in our lives today. What might happen if we stop and open our hands and our spirits to receive God's life-giving power?

Communion + Examen

This practice keeps us together as we make space for God's Spirit to change us.

When in the last week have I made space for the Holy Spirit?

What has kept me from making space for the Holy Spirit?

What might be a barrier in this next week to the Holy Spirit?

How can I make space to sit with the Holy Spirit this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Spiritual Practices