



## TRANSFORMATIONS, PART I TRANSFORMING MY FEELINGS

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I'm excited to be starting a new message series with you this morning. I'm calling it "Transformations" and it is based out of the Psalms. When I was a kid, the main thing I knew about the book of Psalms was that it was one of the few books I could always find quickly in my Bible. All I had to do was open it to the very middle and there it was.

In many ways, that's true of Psalms in more ways than one. It's easy to find yourself in them, because they're so accessible. And they're close to the center of everything. All of life's experiences find expression in the Psalms.

It's no accident that the heart of the Bible is this unique and wonderful collection of prayers in the form of poems. C.S. Lewis once wrote, "*It seems to me appropriate, almost inevitable, that when that great Imagination...submitted to express Itself in human speech, the speech should sometimes be poetry.*"

When you study the book of Psalms, you can't help but be impressed by the care and craftsmanship that went into writing it. It is a work of art. I think that's partly why many people like the Psalms in the King James Version, with its Thees and Thous. It sounds like Shakespeare. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." It sounds poetic. It sounds holy.

But in the original language, the Psalms were earthy and gut wrenching. They were intended to be much closer to the stuff of life than we imagine them. And that's what I'm hoping we can reconnect with in this series.

I'll tell you right up front – this is not going to be a study of the Psalms. I'm not going to take 3 years of Sundays and walk through all 150 chapters. Instead, we're going to use the Psalms as the basis for talking about various areas of our lives that need transformation.

I really like something Eugene Peterson wrote. He said:

*The Psalms are the best tools available for working the faith – one hundred and fifty carefully crafted prayers that deal with the great variety of operations that God carries on in us and attend to all the parts of our lives that are, at various times and in different ways, rebelling and trusting, hurting and praising.*

That's what is so appealing about the Psalms: No matter what your life circumstances, you can find a Psalm that seems to describe exactly what you're going through. Your good times and bad times, your highs and lows all find a voice here.

But there is more to the Psalms than just the right words to express where we're at. Because the Psalms aren't only our words to God – they are God's words to us. The communication through them is two way. And although I may lean on the Psalms to say exactly what I'm thinking, I also need to lean on them for what I'm not thinking. Left to my own devices, I wouldn't pray the way the Psalm writers did. My prayers would be more self serving. My prayers would have hidden agendas. Relying on the Psalms keeps us honest, because we can't make them say what we want them to say.

We planted apple trees in our back yard a couple years ago, and this summer was the first time one of them really produced a crop. It was great to see a bunch of apples, especially on the lower branches. I've never had apple trees before, but I noticed that the weight of the apples was really bending those branches and causing them to grow down toward the ground and develop a big sway in the middle.

Then I remembered driving over to Eastern Washington and seeing the apple orchards, and I remembered seeing boards underneath the lower branches of the trees, propping them up so they would grow the way they were supposed to. So I tried that trick myself, and it worked. It gave the branches the support they needed to grow in the right direction.

That's what the Psalms do for us. We each are weighed down by different aspects of life, and we get headed in the wrong direction. Left on our own, we would naturally grow the wrong way. The Psalms help to prop us up and correct our course. They transform us.

The word transform means to change the nature, function or condition of something. You give it a new purpose or a new shape or a new direction. We can see that happening over and over again for the Psalm writers. They bring their concerns, their questions and their praise to God and leave transformed. And what they learn they share with us and invite us to be transformed as well.

What happens when we bring God our history? What happens when he gets a hold of our doubts? What happens when we apply the Psalms to our fears? Those are the kinds of questions we'll look at over the next few weeks, to see what kinds of transformation God might be wanting to do in our lives.

And that's probably the hardest way to read any section of the Bible, because none of us really want to change. Deep down, we'd prefer to be told that we're okay as is. And when it comes to God's acceptance of us – that's true. He takes us lumps and all. But the invitation to follow Christ implies getting up and moving. We are to keep pressing on toward the goal. As author Bruce Barton once said, "When you're through changing, you're through."

To get us started I want to talk about transforming our feelings. What role do our emotions play in our relationship with God?

We don't talk much about feelings in church. In his book, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, Pete Scazzero wrote, "*The link between emotional health and spiritual maturity is a large, unexplored area of discipleship.*"

It's true. Churches don't generally focus on feelings. We concentrate more on spiritual growth, moral issues, learning to serve, and so on. That's just the nature of church. It's not a therapy group or a Dr. Phil episode. But all spiritual issues are intertwined with our feelings. We can't separate them. So every once in a while we need to stop and see if we're handling things in a healthy way.

Part of the hesitancy to deal with emotions in church is a fear that emotions will play too large of a role in our faith. I remember seeing illustrations like this train in Sunday School classes. The engine was facts, the middle car was faith, and the caboose was feelings. The point was that we don't base our faith on our emotions – we base it on facts.

That's a good reminder, because some people mistake a rush of emotion for being evidence of God, when sometimes it isn't. We can be misled by our emotions. But the picture of that train can put feelings so far to the back that they're never dealt with. The feelings caboose seems to just be slowing things down.

So the first transformation that needs to happen is to recognize that **God designed us to have feelings**. They are an important part of human existence. Not only that, they are part of how we are created in God's image.

Because the Bible describes God as having feelings. David refers to God's anger. Other places describe God as a jealous God. Jesus wept. We can grieve the Holy Spirit. Isaiah says God rejoices over us. A couple of Psalms talk about God's laughter. Proverbs says he takes delight in people.

Our capacity to feel is a gift from God and part of what makes us human. Even our less pleasant feelings. Anger and sadness are not "evil". Sometimes people experience enormous guilt for feeling mad or upset or depressed. But the ability to feel is not wrong. We can't burden ourselves with a weight that God isn't putting on us. Feelings are part of how we are designed. Although we might sometimes prefer to be numb, emotions connect us with our Creator, because he too has emotions.

David had no trouble expressing or interpreting his feelings. It's easy to spot the emotions behind almost every Psalm attributed to him. But Psalm 30 stands out as one of the great examples of God taking David's feelings and turning them into something new.

### **Psalm 30**

*I will exalt you, O LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths  
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.*

*O LORD my God, I called to you for help and you healed me.*

*O LORD, you brought me up from the grave;  
you spared me from going down into the pit.*

*Sing to the LORD, you saints of his; praise his holy name.*

*For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime;  
weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.*

*When I felt secure, I said, "I will never be shaken."*

*O LORD, when you favored me, you made my mountain stand firm;  
but when you hid your face, I was dismayed.*

*To you, O LORD, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy:*

*"What gain is there in my destruction, in my going down into the pit?*

*Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?*

*Hear, O LORD, and be merciful to me; O LORD, be my help."*

*You turned my wailing into dancing;*

*you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,*

*that my heart may sing to you and not be silent.*

*O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever.*

There is a lot of emotion packed into those verses. It has desperation. Joy. Anger. Sadness. Frustration. Discouragement. Celebration. Grief. Confidence. Thankfulness. David runs the gamut of feelings.

Not only is there emotion – there is movement happening. David doesn't seem to be staying in the same spot for long. God uses David's feelings to lead him to new places. We can see the journey unfold, and it begins with God giving David

### **A new view.**

Look at that first section again:

*I will exalt you, O LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths  
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.*

*O LORD my God, I called to you for help and you healed me.*

*O LORD, you brought me up from the grave;  
you spared me from going down into the pit.*

The Psalm starts out on a thankful note, but it gives us a background story that David didn't start out there. He started in despair. He was in a dark, dark place. It was a place of hopelessness. From there he called out to God, and God heard him.

Emotions are so tightly connected to our circumstances. Even circumstances that are only in our mind are powerful enough to alter our moods. You wait on pins and needles for that lab report to come from the doctor. All kinds of possibilities play out in your mind. You have your funeral halfway planned when the envelope arrives and tells you the results were normal. Suddenly, even though your health hasn't changed, your emotions do because you're flooded with relief.

God knows that how we see our circumstances is what affects the way we feel about life and about him. If he can alter our view and raise our sights to see what he is capable of, then our feelings of hopelessness and despair will change.

David cried out to God and said that the Lord lifted him out of the depths. The Hebrew word is the same as for drawing water out of a deep well. Do you remember when baby Jessica was trapped in a well 20 years ago for 58 hours? There was endless media coverage at the time. Today, Jessica has no memories of being trapped there. She was too young to even be that aware of where she was. But what nobody can forget is the intensity of the effort that went into her rescue. The crew was working desperately around the clock, thinking through every scenario, taking great care to not put her in more danger. When she was down in that dark hole, Jessica had no idea all the resources that were at work on her behalf. You can imagine how it felt for her as she was rising toward the light, and how she went from not being able to see anything to seeing this frenzy of activity and loving people all around her.

God is equally careful and concerned about rescuing us. He goes to great lengths to reach us and lift us up out of the depths. And just like Jessica, when we're down in that dark hole, we have no idea how many resources God is putting to work on our behalf. We can't see it. Do you feel like you've been forgotten? You haven't. God knows right where you are, and right where I am. And as he pulls us up out of that darkness, we can start to see glimpses of what he has done and what he's doing. God lifts our eyes from our surroundings to himself. We have a new view, and our emotion of despair is transformed into an emotion of thankfulness.

That's God's desire – to give us a new view of what he can do and what he has done.

He also gives us a **new perspective**.

*Sing to the LORD, you saints of his; praise his holy name.  
For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime;  
weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.*

I've never quite understood hotels. You pay for a full day, but you can't check in until three or four in the afternoon, then you have to be out of there by 11:00 the next morning.

And now with electronic keys, they don't mess around. When your time is up, that key no longer works.

David's description of weeping is that of a hotel guest, coming to stay the night. It makes itself at home and proves to be a terrible guest. It keeps us up all night. It feels like it will never go away. But there's a comfort, because when the morning comes, that key is not going to work in the door anymore. Weeping will be out of a place to stay, because the room has already been given to a new guest – Joy.

Emotions are so powerful that when we're going through a crisis, it feels like we will never recover. Everything about a situation may say that the feelings will never go away. But if it is a lie that emotions are unimportant, it is equally a lie that our emotions have the last word. They will not win the day. God is bigger, and he says that in the long run, sadness cannot have the last word.

That's a truth we have to cling to with all our might. As overpowering as our grief feels now, no matter how unending it seems, one day it will be completely dwarfed by God's favor. That is a guarantee.

In addition to gaining new perspective on our emotions, God invites us to be transformed by a **new understanding**.

*When I felt secure, I said, "I will never be shaken."  
O LORD, when you favored me, you made my mountain stand firm;  
but when you hid your face, I was dismayed.*

What I like about this section is David's clarity. His able to articulate exactly what he is feeling. Security. Confidence. Then dismay. He is also able to identify the causes of those feelings – God's favor. God hiding his face.

What is our true feeling and why? One of the ways emotions get the better of us is when we don't have that kind of clarity.

When Addison was three, he was very upset one day, and he said "I HATE Christmas!" We didn't want him using such a strong word, so we said, "No Addison. We don't say hate. You can say you're angry if you want to." So he said, "I'm angry!" Trying to make this a real teachable moment, we asked him, "And why are you angry?" To which he replied, "Because I HATE it!"

That's about all you can expect of a three year old. When we're older, we can put into practice what David did – identifying what we're feeling as well as the true causes of our emotions. It is only when we get to the root causes that we will be able to understand our own behavior and start to change.

The author Ronald Levant gives the example of a father whose son never showed up when they were supposed to take part in a father-son hockey game. When his therapist

asked him how he felt about it, the father said "He shouldn't have done it!" It wasn't until the therapist prompted him again that he managed to say he was upset.

When we don't know what we're feeling, we can't express it clearly. But that won't stop the emotion. It will still find a way to come out – just often sideways. We use what are called “feelings defenses” – strategies we lean on when facing our feelings seems too difficult. Maybe you can recognize some of them in yourself

- Blaming other people for our choices
- Pretending nothing is wrong
- Joking to deflect talking about what's real
- Controlling everything in your world
- Trying your hardest to be perfect
- Giving the silent treatment
- Using anger to keep people distant
- Getting sick (Karin used to plan her sore throats in high school when she couldn't face the pressure)

Those strategies work temporarily, but they don't really stop the feelings. They only mask them. And in the long run, they end up hurting us and those around us. They become a prison for us. But God is the God of truth, and the truth will set us free. The Psalms encourage us to move past our defenses and into a place where we can name our feelings accurately and identify their causes. David models that in a beautiful way.

He also exhibits another aspect of transformed emotions, which is a **new honesty**.

*To you, O LORD, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy:  
"What gain is there in my destruction, in my going down into the pit?  
Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?  
Hear, O LORD, and be merciful to me; O LORD, be my help."*

That is straightforward and heartfelt. He explains to God why he thinks it makes no sense to leave him where he is at, and then he asks for help. No beating around the bush or being cryptic – just an honest request.

Transformation requires transparency. So much of the time, we try to cover up what we're feeling. Sometimes it hurts too much to admit it. Karin used to work with a nonprofit organization called Confident Kids. They have support groups for kids who come from hurting families, where there has either been a divorce, a move, substance abuse, or something else. One time a little boy came to the group and the discussion went to crying. He said in a tough voice, “I never cry.” When the leader pursued that and asked him why he said, “Because I'm afraid I won't be able to stop.”

That's about the truth of it. We're afraid once we open the floodgates and let out a little emotion, we won't be able to pull ourselves together again. So we hide it and try to use some of those defenses I mentioned earlier.

In order for our emotions to be useful and usable, it requires more honesty than that. As many of you know, my brother-in-law John was recently deployed to Iraq. But before he left, in the last few weeks before he said goodbye to his wife and kids, the pressure of leaving for 6 months really started to weigh on him. He felt that for his family's sake he really needed to be strong and keep it all together. So he put a brave face on it and tried to be really positive. In the meantime, he started experiencing panic attacks as his emotions sought an outlet.

Finally one day he stopped his car and just broke down crying, and he said to God, "Lord, I just don't want to go." It was the first time he had been able to say out loud what he was really feeling, and as he released that to God, God was able to work with him and bring a new peace.

We can be honest with God. We can be honest with each other. As we do that, God can work the final transformation and bring us a **new joy**.

*You turned my wailing into dancing;  
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,  
that my heart may sing to you and not be silent.  
O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever.*

The wailing is a wail of mourning. Those are end of the line emotions when you believe it is over. When we're at the end, God brings a new beginning.

Sackcloth was what people wore to express grief. It was literally a potato sack, like burlap. It was not real clothes – just sort of a loose fitting piece of material that was a makeshift garment. Then God replaces it with gladness, which is sometimes translated as glee or mirth. One commentator said that the way God wraps us up in it, it's not coming off. The word there for clothe is to bind or gird up. We will be secure in this newfound uncontainable joy, and no one will be able to take it away.

### **Isaiah 51:11**

*The ransomed of the LORD will return.  
They will enter Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy will crown their heads.  
Gladness and joy will overtake them,  
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

God is in the business of transforming our emotions, and he does it not only so that we will feel better, but to equip us. Transformed emotions give us opportunity to reach in three directions.

### **Reach Upward**

David knew that what he was feeling was a cause to reach out to God.

George MacDonald once wrote, “God loves not sorrow, yet rejoices to see a man sorrowful, for in his sorrow man leaves his heavenward door on the latch, and God can enter to help him.” Sadness becomes a gateway for God’s comfort. When we are feeling hurt or grieved, God can use that emotion to speak to us.

It’s not just the tough emotions that put that choice in front of us. Happiness and joy also open the door to connect with God. We saw that a few weeks ago in what James wrote:

**James 5:13**

*Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.*

God is a God of joy, and when we don’t connect our joy to his, we miss out. There was a dean of a seminary who used to keep an eye on students, and every once in a while, he would take one aside and say, “You’re doing great in your studies, you seem to be getting along well with people. You’re committed to your calling to be a pastor. But I don’t see any joy in you. If you can’t find it, you might want to consider a different profession, because you’re going to have a hard time convincing people that it’s good news if you’re not joyful yourself.”

Emotions give us a way to relate to God on a level that simple words can’t. Our feelings also give us the opportunity to

**Reach Inward**

As we said before, emotions are not an end in themselves. They signify something deeper that’s going on. One way that they can bring transformation to our lives is by taking us inward.

I was talking to a friend this week who was feeling completely overwhelmed by his life, which is incredibly full right now. He said he felt like he was in the ocean, surrounded by all kinds of junk and trying to make it to shore. He said, “I just need to work on having a stronger back.” I thought about that and I said, “Maybe that’s not what God is wanting to teach you. Maybe he’s wanting you to see you can’t do it all.” The feeling of being overwhelmed can sometimes be a warning sign, saying something’s got to give.

Feelings like that aren’t to be ignored or pressed down or overcome – they’re a genuine gift from God. They are the red flags that say something needs to change in my life.

In an earlier psalm, David wrote these words:

**Psalm 4:4**

*In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.*

Although it's not easy, anger gives an opportunity for some self examination. What makes me tick? Why did I react that way? Is there something deeper going on? It's a good excuse to search your heart and take some inventory.

Sadness can have the same effect. Paul had shared some hard instructions with the Corinthian church that had made them feel bad. But Paul said this:

### **2 Corinthians 7:8, 11**

*Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it...See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done.*

Good things came out of the sadness, because the Corinthians used that emotion to rethink how they were acting. It shaped them in new ways, and they were better for it.

### **Reach Outward**

Our emotion can serve as a tool to draw others toward God. We can also represent him to other people in the way we express our emotion.

One of the most touching scenes in the Bible is in the book of Job. Job has just learned that his property has been destroyed and his children have been killed. He is a puddle of grief. His three friends come to comfort him, and this is what happens:

### **Job 2:12-13**

*When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.*

No words. It is the most profound thing the friends do in the entire book. . They simply connect with Job emotionally, entering into his sorrow with him. It's an outstanding demonstration of using feelings in the best possible way. Those friends stand in for God beside Job, being present and simply feeling what he feels.

That is one way of representing Jesus, because that is what he does for us. The New King James version translates Isaiah 53:4 this way:

### **Isaiah 53:4**

*Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.*

We're used to thinking about Jesus taking on our sin, but he lifts our emotional baggage as well. He carries our sorrows and griefs. He sits with us and weeps with us in our pain. But he doesn't leave us there.

Ultimately, all our emotions will be transformed. God may work through all our emotions now, but the biggest transformation of our feelings will happen that day when we see him face to face and sing a brand new Psalm. And we enter into our joy.

Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.

As we close, I want to leave you with two questions to consider for yourself:

Where do I need God's transformation in my emotions?

What about this topic is uncomfortable for me?

God gave you your emotions. He's ready to work through them.