



Chapter 1: The Call to Communion

Every journey has a beginning, an entry point, a necessary starting place. The journey through *Transformed Into Fire* ultimately begins with the question, “*Who has God been to me?*” The answer delves into the whole of our spiritual story and how head and heart, communication and communion, have integrated—or not—in creating our story with God. This chapter of the *Journey Guide* provides spaces to examine our spiritual history and notice where we have been—all of which are vital if we are to explore new territory of relationship with God.

In the early going of writing the book, chapter two was originally the first chapter, but something was missing. After contemplating my own journey, I saw my early life with God marked by yearning as well as a sense of absence. God felt more like the distant boss than the tender friend. Transformation began with looking deeper into this one essential relationship. Knowing I’m not unique, I chose to begin *Transformed Into Fire* with the core issue of how we relate to God and the image of God that has been shaped by our relating. And why? Because if we have serious distortions of God lodged in our head or heart, then a domino effect is created that cripples our personal devotion and kingdom participation.

I once mentored a woman who wished for a deeper life with God. Although there were many hurts in her early life, she chose to focus on her life now as an energetic wife and mother, active church member, and successful part-time career woman. However, she was caught in a trap of performance, and intimacy with God was foreign. I gave her an essay to read by Brennan Manning on healing our image of God and self, and one portion stopped her: “The Spirit of God is the great unmasker of illusions, the great destroyer of icons and idols. God’s love for us is so great that He does not permit us to harbor false images, no matter how attached we are to them. God strips those falsehoods from us no matter how naked it may make us, because it is better to live naked in truth than clothed in fantasy.” To my great surprise, she took issue with the last portion of the quote. “I don’t know about that living naked in reality,” she said. “What’s so wrong with a little fantasy? Who does it harm? Maybe some doors aren’t meant to be opened.”

I applauded my friend’s honesty—many would agree with Manning’s quote with no intention of actually living it. But I knew that her alienation from God would last as long as her response of “maybe some doors aren’t meant to be opened.” Friends, the doors need to be opened—all of them—and the contents aired out. To come present to our image of God requires us to come present to the life that forged it. Living vulnerably in the light of truth might carry pain, but in the end there’s nothing more comforting,

more satisfying, more sweet, than to dwell with God in reality. God is the Ultimate Real, and those who love God must love reality.

There's an old saying—we don't see things as they are; we see things as *we* are. Deliverance from this insulated, self-informed vision of God is essential as A.W. Tozer tells us:

That our idea of God corresponds as nearly as possible to the true being of God is of immense importance. Compared with our actual thoughts about Him, our credal statements are of little consequence. Our real idea of God may lie buried under the rubbish of conventional religious notions and may require an intelligent and vigorous search before it is finally unearthed and exposed for what it is. Only after an ordeal of painful self-probing are we likely to discover what we actually believe about God....I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God.

The journey's beginning is to consent to a process of dedication to reality, to start to see things as God does. To do this we must encounter God, and to authentically encounter God we must confront the false images of him that block encounter.

Who has God been to you? What is your image of Christ? The questions are important because the answers shape our response to other key questions: *Who am I? How must I live? What matters most?* Re-read Manning's quote right now and wonder at his words. I pray you can fearlessly hold the pieces of your personal history with open hands before the Lord. God as he is, not as we make him—he alone is our transformation.

Perhaps the last, best question before delving into head/heart issues is this: *Is vulnerable living—a life in reality—something you truly want?*



First Stirrings

A place for first impressions, thoughts, feelings, reactions experienced in the chapter.

I was drawn to....

Whatever comes into your mind when you think about
God is the most important thing about you.

—A.W. Tozer—

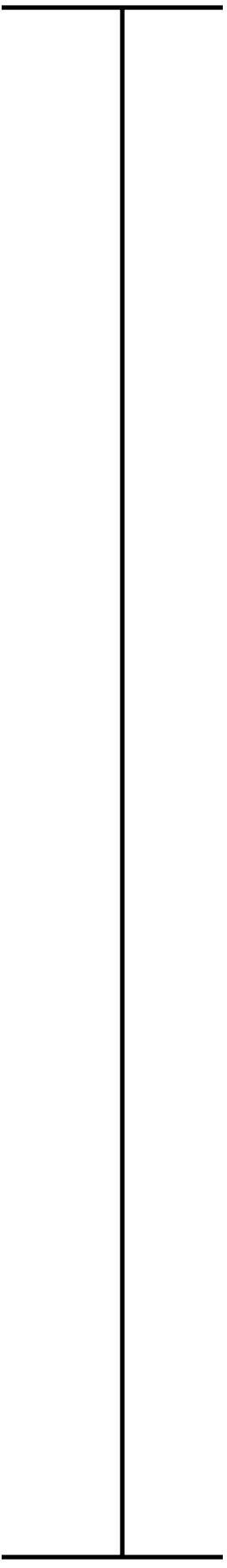
I was resistant to....

Spiritual Story Timeline

Happenings, markers, images, memories, shapers on the journey

Childhood

Present

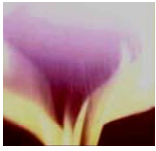


One of the key quotes from chapter one is this: “I *know* that God loves me, but I rarely or never *experience* his love” (page 20). Sit with these words for a few moments. Does this quote fit any of the times marked on your timeline? What memories/thoughts/images link to this statement for you? What desires or longings feel stirred?

The head/heart split is, unfortunately, a common condition among many Christians. Again, think about your timeline and ask the following:

- ▲ To what degree has a split between the head’s knowledge and the heart’s experience been present in your faith journey?
- ▲ How has this schism influenced how you see yourself, God, and the world?

Use specific rememberings from your early faith development if you can.



Prayer for the Journey

A place for conversing, listening, asking, healing, communing, with God.

Father, God, I come into your presence with mixed desires, mixed feelings, but I cling to the part of me that longs for more of you, to be more fully yours. Help me to come present to all the thoughts and feelings I have in this moment about you and about me—both those that feel light and those that feel heavy. May I have the courage to fearlessly face all that stirs within me now. And help me to begin my journey of honesty by owning these thoughts and feelings before you. Shield me from any shame that might want to color this time with you and give me a language for what you are showing me.

(Take a few moments to quiet yourself before the Lord—mindful of him and his intimate nearness to you in this minute—and name all the thoughts and feelings you’re sensing, giving them to the Lord. Then sit in silence for a few more moments.)

Jesus, I desire to live a life in reality—your reality—the only one that is authentic and lasting. I acknowledge that false ideas and illusions are resident within me and only by receiving who you are and participating in your kingdom can I hope to live a life that is true and abundant.

I give to you the distorted ways I’ve imaged you—the hard-driven boss, the harsh taskmaster, the scorekeeper waiting to pounce upon my every mistake or the “sugar daddy,” the pushover who will excuse anything—and declare that these images do not mirror who you really are. And I hand to you the products of this imagery—fear, apathy, mistrust, ungodly guilt, excursions into sin, performance-driven faith. Take these pieces, take who I am, into the mercy I trust you possess toward me. I confess how sin has tainted my vision of you, and I confess the sin that I have committed in response to this false vision.

(Take a moment of quiet here. You might even picture yourself handing sin and falseness over to Jesus. Wait on the Lord for any other things he might bring to mind for you to confess and turn over to him.)

Lord, set aright the skewed vision I hold of you, myself, and what life in the kingdom is. Only you can accomplish this work, and I consent to cooperate with your grace toward my healing. I desire to know you and to love you with all of my heart and all of my understanding. I believe this is possible but help my unbelief. Teach me what it means to commune with you, to receive you as the tender-hearted friend who loves me like no other, that I might serve you with my whole, unfettered self.

Give me the grace I need to do this journey in a fearless and faithful way. Your Word assures me that you will not leave me as an orphan, that you will come to me (John 14:17-19) and that you and the Father make your home within me as I walk in obedience (John 14:22-24). May your Holy Spirit root out any fear or apprehension and replace it with your perfect love.

(Take a few moments to repeat the two paraphrases of the verses from John silently. Sit and be restful with them. If you do have a sense of fear, keep repeating them until you begin to sense release.)

Help me, Lord, to receive your love in the midst of both the beauty and wreckage of who I've been. I affirm your Word through the prophet Jeremiah as your heart toward me in this moment: "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you and will bring you back from captivity" (29:11-14).

(You might want to read through this verse slowly several times, asking God to deepen its truth in your head and heart.)

Lord, give me what I need to keep coming present to my own heart as I read *Transformed Into Fire* so that I might hear your word to me and be more fully formed into the image of Christ. I want to see you—with both my head and my heart—for who you really are and not in the ways my false and anxious thoughts would distort you. Come and guide, come and illumine, come and be my companion, my Lord, on this journey of transformation.

The Bible does not cast faith as a spiritual footpath to heaven or an inner stirring that we try to rev up when the chips are down. Neither does Scripture describe faith as a cognitive capacity that God activates to effect our justification. Rather, faith is consistently defined in Scripture, at base, as a set of trust relationships—with God, with neighbor, with the world, with creation.... The good news of the gospel is not an announcement or a proclamation, it's a Person: Jesus the Christ. Jesus is the Gospel, God-made-flesh is the gospel. God-became-one-of-us is the gospel. The good news is that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself."

This is relationship at its best, relationship as God defines it.

—Leonard Sweet—