

## Transformation

Rhys Thomas

Will a part of me keep going after I quit breathing? Throughout history, people have come up with a lot of different answers. Even in the time of Jesus, as recorded in the gospels and Acts, the two major political parties, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, disagreed. The Pharisees said yes; the Sadducees said no. Both groups had really smart people who had been arguing their positions for about 300 years. Both sides could be really convincing. Atheists are not the only ones who think that life on earth is all we get. Some people who really care about God have come to that conclusion, too.

But how could they think that? Easy. God could have made us to be temporary, a single-use product. We think that lots of disposable products are better than re-usable products: disposable diapers, Baggies, Post-It notes, just about everything made of plastic. Being disposable would not necessarily make us any less important to God.

So how are we to know? With really smart people with really good explanations that are exactly opposite to one another, things can get confusing. If you think entitlements, the Federal Reserve, taxation, foreign relations, not to mention Algebra, are complicated, how are we supposed to figure out if a piece of each one of us continues to exist after we quit breathing?

The manufacturer is going to have to tell us.

But is that a reasonable expectation? Yes. And here is why. I think you ought to memorize these three steps because they will come in very handy when talking to other people, either church people or non-church people. Either group can be really confused and this tends to bring it into focus.

First, has the universe always existed or did someone make it? There are only two choices. The answer does not get into the nature of the Creator, just whether a Creator exists. People tend to confuse the issue by jumping directly to their own conception of God – whether that be Jesus or Muhammad or Buddha or a collection of gods. The question is created or not; that's all.

Our scientific system is totally against the notion that the universe has always been here. Certainly, many people talk about the Big Bang. Who made the bang? Many people believe that life arose spontaneously from a primordial soup, and those bits and pieces randomly fell together to make life, which then evolved into the many species of germs, plants, and animals we see today. As unscientific as that theory is, people believe it. But, people do that. We all believe some things that are totally irrational – that the Cubs will win the pennant next year, that inflation was less than 3% last year, that there will be a lasting peace in the Middle East.

The great thing about the question of creation, whether the universe has always been here or not, is that it does not have to be answered first. You can move on to the other two questions, the third of which will decide the first two. So, if the person you are talking to (even if you are talking to yourself) can't decide between creation and always been here, move on to question two.

If the universe were created, was it on purpose or an accident? That's kind of a strange question, and you may not have an immediate answer. But, if it were on purpose, then the Creator cares. There is some level of concern there, some level of interest. If the Creator has no interest in the Creation, there might as well not be a Creator. But, you don't have to answer right away. The third question settles all three.

If the universe were created and the Creator cares, then the Creator must communicate. If a communication exists, then Creation and Concern are both proven.

But how do we find that communication? Lots of books claim to be from the Creator. If you want to get into it, you can establish logically that the communication must be Understandable, Universal, Useful, and Unmistakable (all of which conveniently start with “U”). You can pursue those ideas on your own. My point is that the Bible qualifies, so the existence of a Creator is established, and that He cares. And, most importantly, that communication from God settles the question of whether a part of each one of us will continue to exist after we quit breathing. The main thrust of the Bible is to tell us about that part that will exist forever.

How we approach the Bible dictates what we will find in it. There are those who think that the Bible is a behavior manual. So, when they read, they find rules about behavior. Some think it is a worship manual, so they find guidelines for what to do when believers get together. Some assume that the Bible is a self-help manual, so they find ways to allow them to like themselves better. I suggest that there is a much broader purpose. It’s about why we’re here, about why God bothered to create something that has been nothing but a headache since people decided to start making their own decisions. It’s about how to fulfill the purpose – and it has to do with the part of you that lives forever.

That eternal part of each person is called your spirit or your soul, which are used almost interchangeably in the Bible. The context of each place tells you whether the author is talking about your eternal part or your life. Hebrews 4:12 even emphasizes how closely related the terms are by saying “The Word of God is living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” Rather than trying to keep straight the finer points of which is which, I’m just going to call your eternal part your spirit. You can figure out from the Bible that you have one, but what is it?

Jesus had perhaps the most descriptive line in John 4:24, “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth.” God doesn’t have molecules. In Genesis 1:24, God is recorded as saying, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.” Looking at the diversity of people, that image can’t be how God looks: height, weight, skin color, eye color, hair color. Rather, we are created as spirits that happen to have physical bodies.

But what does my spirit do? Is it my thought processes? My character? We could guess lots of things. But how does the New Testament describe what our spirits do? Here are just a few passages that address that:

- Romans 8:16 “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God”
- 1 Corinthians 2:11 “For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?”
- Ephesians 4:23 “Be renewed in the spirit of your mind”
- 1 John 4:2 “Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God”

So, our spirits know stuff, tell stuff, and can be improved. But our spirits can’t be just our thought processes, since thought processes sometimes fall apart, like with Alzheimer’s.

So, whatever it is, since it is the real me that will last forever, getting it in top shape seems to be a good idea. The purpose of the Bible is to show us how to do just that.

But having a spirit isn’t very useful if you can’t connect with it. Why does there seem to be this separation between my brain and my spirit? How do I get them back on the same page? That’s what faith is all about.

Have you ever put much thought into what it is like for angels? Not what angels may or may not do for us, but what is it like for them? You live with God. You have no molecules. You are a spirit (Hebrews 1:14 says so). But you can think and make decisions. The proof is in the fact that some angels chose not to stick with God. Sometimes, you get sent to do some job God needs done. You are eternal and you know it. But you've seen failure in heaven, and would like not to go that direction. How? God set up a training program for angels: Creation. More specifically, the church. As Ephesians 3:10 says, "To the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places." As 1 Peter 1:12 puts it, "Things into which angels long to look."

And what could we humans possibly teach angels? Math? Science? Auto mechanics? No, the church gets to teach them the one thing they lack, the one reason why some of them rebelled. They lack faith – because they live with God. There is no faith, just sight. If they can learn faith by watching us, they will become permanent residents, unlike those who lined up on the wrong side in the war in heaven. They will be in the presence of God, have thought processes and faith fully integrated, so they can't flunk out.

The same is true for us. We have faith, which is only possible if we cannot see God. Can we quit believing? There are some who say that, once we believe, we cannot quit. Not only does Romans 11 specifically say that believers can be cut off for future unbelief, but also we could figure it out ourselves. It goes like this. I am absolutely convinced that I make choices. If we really cannot make choices, then God is the great deceiver. Those who claim that choices are an illusion are following the great deceiver, not God. In reality, we need the same parts that angels need in order not to flunk out of heaven: fully integrated thoughts and faith plus being with God. Right now, our spirits keep trying to control our thought processes, but our thought processes are not always up to the task. When our thought processes and our spirits are brought fully back together after we die, then we cannot flunk out.

Right now, the only connection between our brains and our spirits is faith. The universe was created as a place for faith to exist, and our job is to teach faith to spirits, both spirits of angels and spirits of people. Even if no people around us want to hear about faith, the angels are still watching.

But, if I can't make a solid connection between my brain and my spirit, what good is it? God has told us.

1 Corinthians 2:14 says that the things of the Spirit of God are "spiritually discerned." Let me re-word that "spiritually discerned" phrase into something that does conjure up mysterious processes. The things of God are understood by your spirit. If your spirit is connected to your brain through faith, your brain can understand it, too.

2 Corinthians 3:14 "But their [the Israelites] minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ." Faith enables us to understand the things of the spirit. (The thought begins back in verse 1 of that chapter and continues to the middle of chapter 6, but this is the point.) In 4:3 – 4, Paul continues, "But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them."

Ephesians 2:4 – 6, "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." I am very certain that I am still on earth, so the part of me that is seated

in heaven must be my spirit. The spirits of faithful people are already seated in the same place as Jesus is seated, which is at God's right hand (Ephesians 1:20).

Most church people end their prayers with the phrase, "In Jesus' name, Amen" Many have taught – incorrectly – that we are invoking the authority of Jesus. That's not what that phrase means – in the name of. In the Bible, the idea of the "name" of someone is not how you spell it. The "name" of someone was that person's essential nature. In other cultures, choosing a name is a really big deal. It was a big deal in Bible cultures. Here's an illustration.

In Gulf War II, we entered a new chapter in media correspondence, the embedded reporter. They travelled with combat troops and reported while in the middle of the action. Reporters had traveled with troops before, but never before had immediate electronic access both available and permitted. These correspondents were reporting from deep inside the nature of war. The idea was that they would be able to communicate what was going on, to bring the audience into the action.

When we end a prayer with "in the name of Jesus we pray," the thought we should be conveying is, "from deep within the nature of Jesus, I ask this." We are the ultimate embedded reporters – to God – relating what's going on inside the nature of Jesus.

And how do we know what's going on inside the nature of Jesus? 2 Peter 1:4 says that we have been given "great and precious promises that through these we may be partakers of the divine nature."

How do we know that this happens on earth and not just at Judgment? 2 Corinthians 3:18, "But we all, with unveiled face, behold as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord."

Transformation is the promise.

A lot of church goers see themselves as broken. They see no end to their flaws. They proudly announce, "I sin every day," as if this is just to be expected. Many church goers expect transformation only at Judgment. Think about what that means.

If the real me is not fundamentally changed before I die, then the real me is not going to heaven. God is just going to salvage my name tag and hang it on a new creation that I have never met.

If I get to go to heaven because the blood of Jesus keep God from seeing just how messed up I really am, then I am going to spend an eternity as a phoney, in a disguise. The real me will be locked inside a perfect shell, but the real me will never get out.

If I get to go to heaven on Jesus' ticket, then heaven will be populated by a lot of messed up people. How long do you suppose it will take them to trash heaven?

Most people know things about themselves that they do not like. Do I really want to spend an eternity with me? That sounds more like hell than heaven.

Transformation is essential if heaven is going to work. That's why transformation is promised. Transformation appears to be beyond our grasp – as evidenced by our countless attempts to fix ourselves. But God's promises are always beyond our ability. If we could do them by our own skill or self-discipline, God would not need to promise anything, just give us directions. God's promises are, by nature, beyond human ability.

How do we access those promises? How do we re-connect our brains with our spirits? How do we become embedded in the nature of Jesus?

First, of course, we need to know what God promised. We can spin our wheels for a very long time by chasing promises that God never made. As Peter put it in 1 Peter 2:2, "Long for the pure milk of the word that you may grow thereby."

But delving into the Bible, for most people, ranks somewhere around a trip to the dentist. I'll do it if I'm in pain, but otherwise it's something best avoided. How do we make it interesting, even fascinating, enjoyable, a sought-after activity?

- Know why you are reading. As history books go, the Bible is not very good. Certainly, the facts are accurately recorded. But it is more a collection of anecdotes than a history book. Why did God pick those events to string together? To give us stuff to think about. It's not a book of directions. It's food for thought. As 1 Corinthians 10:11 says, "These things happened to them as examples."
- Pick up on the impossible promises. If you find yourself saying to yourself, "I can't do that," you just found one.
- There will not be a test. Read for enjoyment. And if reading is not your thing, get it on CD. Listen for enjoyment.
- When Paul wrote in Colossians 3:16, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly," he was not writing about memorizing Scripture. Memorizing may become something you want as you grow in faith because it will help you be better able to respond to questions. But when Paul wrote that, there was no New Testament to memorize – it wasn't finished yet. Paul's application was "teaching and admonishing one another with songs and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Sing songs that teach important things about God. You'll enjoy it and others will learn from it.

Once we know what God promised, how do we get out of the way? Most church goers are consumed with doing the things that they sincerely believe will make them acceptable to God. The things they want to do are probably good things, but they get so focused on them that they lose track of God.

Think about the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. Abraham gets Isaac all tied down and raises his knife to kill him when God stops him. In Genesis 22:11, "But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' So he said, 'Here I am.'"

Most church goers would say, "Just a minute. Let me finish this."

So how do we get good stuff done without becoming so wrapped up in the doing that we miss the point?

Attendance is a case in point. Hebrews 10:25. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together." But attendance is not the goal. Rather, the context talks about encouraging and stimulating one another to love and good deeds. You can't one-another by yourself. One way to get out of the way and let God accomplish His transformation promises is to hang out with fellow Christians so that you and they can be encouraged and stimulated. 1 Thessalonians 5:11 says to comfort one another and edify one another. By the way, you don't have to attend a boring service to make points with God. If it's boring, God is not being served.

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul wrote about the Lord's Supper, which is a group activity designed to encourage and build up believers. Paul wrote in verse 30, "For this reason [messing up the Lord's Supper], many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep." There is no magic in the Lord's Supper. But, what it illustrates to us is very important for keeping us on an even keel, for keeping us out of God's way as He transforms us. God's symbolism appears to be something we need. For example, the Lord's Supper is a symbol of our connectedness of spirit, our fellowship (1 Corinthians 10:16), also our miraculous unity (1 Corinthians 10:17). 1 Corinthians 10:10 reminds us of our participation in Jesus' sacrifice, and without that attitude, transformation is not going to happen. The singleness of purpose demonstrated in repeating this ceremony together (1 Corinthians 10:21) helps to carve away the worldly loyalties that keep us

tied down, instead of being free for being rebuilt. The bread reminds us that we have been released from slavery to sin, that we should expect affliction in this life, and that we are in haste to reach the next one. The cup reminds us of being reserved for Godly purposes. Each of these reminders makes us more available for transformation, less blinded by the things and people on the outside. The Christians in Corinth lost sight of the meaning and, because of being diverted from the goal, were spiritually sick or even dead. I don't see any reason why this would be different for us.

The same thought would hold true for baptism, in itself a small ritual that we could just read about. As with the Lord's Supper, the action itself is not magical, but it is a training aid that seems to be necessary to make our transformation real to us. In Galatians 3:27, baptism is directly connected with transformation, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." Also in Titus 3:5, "Through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit." Baptism helps us keep the right attitudes that open us up to the work of God, like being a living sacrifice (Romans 6:3 – 4, 12:1), being reserved for godly purposes (1 Corinthians 6:11), and being rescued from an evil world (1 Peter 3:21).

But how do we keep a positive outlook in a broken world full of disappointments? Paul wrote in Philippians 4:8, "Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things." Think about good stuff. Like Colossians 3:1, "Seek those things which are above."

But what about those church goers whose goal in life seems to be to drag you down? In Romans 16:17, Paul wrote, "Note those who cause divisions and avoid them."

What about those church goers who constantly excuse their bad behavior? I'm not talking about those who haven't overcome yet, those who know that something needs to be fixed but just haven't gotten there yet. Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 5:11, of those who excuse bad behavior, "Do not keep company with them."

How do I avoid being sucked in to the ways of the world? Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:19, "Remember, you are the Temple of the Holy Spirit." Remember that you are teaching angels. Remember that your spirit is seated in the heavenly places, in the same place as Jesus is seated. Hebrews 12:14, "Pursue peace with all men." And, there is that fall-back position expressed in 1 Corinthians 10:14, when all else fails, just run away from evil.

1 Thessalonians 5:21, "Test all things; hold fast what is good."

Lots of well-meaning church leaders will tell you how to go about being acceptable to God. But, on Judgment Day, God is not going to consult with them concerning whom to let through the gate. You will be on your own. You will stand or fall based on your own decisions. How do you figure it all out? "Test all things; hold fast to what is good." An illustration I have used before fits here. In graduate school, one of your tasks will be a literature research project. You are given a question, depending on what you are going to graduate school for, and you are supposed to find everything about it in the professional literature. Then, you are supposed to write up a research proposal on how you would go about answering the question that was put to you. Other graduate students have asked me, "How many articles do I need to find? I have 27, is that enough?" My answer is this, "Until you can read an article about your question and see the holes in the article, you don't understand it yet. Keep finding more articles until you can see the holes in all of them. Then you understand it and can start writing." The same is true for things of the spirit. Until you can see the problems with the advice, keep gathering advice. When you finally can see the holes in the advice, you are ready. Keep the good parts. That's

what Paul meant when he wrote, “Test all things; hold fast to what is good.” Also in Philippians 3:17, “Join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern.” Until you can see the flaws, you don’t know which parts to keep.

The purpose of the Bible is to inform us about the purpose for which we were created: to teach faith to fellow spirits, both in heaven and on earth. It tells us of the reconnection of our brains and our spirits through faith, and of our transformation into the divine nature while still on earth. That’s why they called it Good News.