

Transformational Faith or Seinfeldian Spirituality?
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Psalm 40:1-8

For nearly the entire decade of the nineties the wildly popular sitcom, *Seinfeld*, ruled the airwaves. A poster child for postmodernity, the series rejected the very notion of any metanarrative, stringing together a series of mundane and often unrelated, zany incidents. It became famous as “the TV show about nothing.”

Sometimes something significant *almost* happened. Like the episode in which Jerry experiences a kind of conversion and becomes the good Jerry. He then sits down with his friend, George, and encourages him to talk about his true feelings. George is moved to tears as he shares his heart. Then the camera pans to a horrified Jerry, who stands up and backs away from the couch as he says, “Well, good luck with all that,” recoiling from the burden of intimacy and retreating once again into superficiality.

Only in the final episode does anything *really* change. The foursome observes a carjacking. Not only do they not intervene, but Kramer films the whole incident, and they walk away cracking jokes about the poor slob who lost his car. The victim, however, sees them and reports their behavior, and they are dragged into court to stand trial for violating a Good Samaritan law.

A long litany of witnesses from previous episodes testify about the callousness of the characters, who, in the end, are sentenced to a year in jail. The scene is reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre’s dark existentialist play, *No Exit*, which sentences its three thoughtless characters to a kind of hell—an afterlife together in a sealed room.

So, something does happen after all, a poetic justice that goes against the entire grain of the series—except that the characters still don’t get it. The 9-year run ends with the protagonists in a jail cell. George is talking about the buttons on his shirt and Kramer is pleased that he finally got the water out of his ear.

I was living overseas during the Seinfeld era, so I’m not a junkie, though I have seen a few of the interminable re-runs. And it can be very funny. But it is ultimately a tragic

comedy, as the writers acknowledge in the final episode, because the characters are stuck in an absurd loop in which nothing really changes.

The Bible is a very different kind of story. In the Bible things are constantly changing. There is a story line. There is a metanarrative. It is going somewhere. In the first eleven chapters of Genesis the world God created is ruined by human rebellion, and he then spends the rest of the book getting it back, culminating in the ultimate victory of God and his kingdom in the final pages.

But, while most Christians would affirm that God is changing the big picture, they can't point to much transformation that God is working either in their character or through them into the world or for them in the circumstances of life. Having assured our own eternal salvation, we become absorbed in the mundane and push the transcendent onto the back burner. And our religion becomes a big show about nothing—a Seinfeldian sameness in which we are neither transformed nor transforming. Only this time it's not funny.

Today we are beginning a series of messages that will focus on transformation from a variety of angles, and this first one looks at transformed circumstances. In Psalm 40 David had just had a significant transforming experience, and he is bubbling over. As we read his account, it provides an occasion for us to ask if we are, in fact, expecting and experiencing this same transforming dynamic.

Psalm 40:1-3

I waited patiently for the LORD;
 he turned to me and heard my cry.
² He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
 out of the mud and mire;
 he set my feet on a rock
 and gave me a firm place to stand.
³ He put a new song in my mouth,
 a hymn of praise to our God.
 Many will see and fear the LORD
 and put their trust in him.

We don't know exactly what sort of trouble God had rescued David from in this psalm. Some have suggested that it was a sickness that had him near death. Others think it was

an external threat to his kingdom. David certainly describes the experience in dramatic terms—but then again, this is poetry. In some ways I think it's better that David doesn't tell us the nature of the problem, because that makes it a bit easier for us to plug in our own circumstances and see how this transformational template can affect our own spiritual walk.

In these three verses we find three principles that govern our experience of personal transformation. The first one is this: *Transformation takes time*. When we think about divine deliverance, we have a tendency to think in terms of an immediate and miraculous rescue, some cathartic experience that vanquishes our troubles and sets us free. So, the last thing we might expect to hear, and maybe even the last thing we want to hear is what David tells us in v. 1, that he had to “wait patiently on the Lord.”

Waiting is boring. We want trouble-zapping, hallelujah-evoking, divine shock and awe. Maybe you're thinking, I've got enough faith to believe God for a solution right now. So, what is he waiting for? What in the heck am I waiting for? And, doesn't God seem kind of pokey for an omnipotent being?

Whatever David's crisis was, the fact that it required patience means that it must have lasted for some time. That's not good news for me, because I think David had more faith than I do. So, if David didn't have enough faith to prompt God into instant action, neither do I.

But maybe it's not about how much faith you have but how much more faith God wants you to have. You see, however much faith it takes to believe that God will change your circumstances, it takes *more* faith than that to keep on believing—that is, to wait. A flash of spiritual bravado is not so hard to come by, especially if you know the answer is right around the corner. But when that answer doesn't come right away, and when things get worse before they get better, then the true quality of your faith is tested. Faith factored by time.

Nobody chooses to wait. If you take your car in to get it fixed, and they say, “We can do this today. When would you like to pick it up?” You're not going to say, “Oh, why don't I just wait until next week to get it? That'll build character.” No, it's only when you show up at 5:45 PM and it's still up on a lift with various parts disassembled, and the mechanic is washing his hands getting ready to go home, that you realize you're going to have to

wait. And if you're like me, you won't be waiting very patiently. In the land of instant everything, patience is not a virtue, it is simply a coping strategy for the impotent.

We're pretty much consumers when it comes to prayer as well. We don't ask God for things with the expectation of waiting. We don't say, "No hurry on this one, Lord. I think I need to grow some more." It's only when the answer doesn't come immediately, and then when it doesn't come quickly, and then when it doesn't come in the short term that we begin to think about the long term and resign ourselves to waiting. This in spite of the fact that we *usually* have to wait for God's transforming work, and in spite of the fact that the unintended consequences of the wait can be just as important as the intended consequences of the change we're seeking.

When God's answer doesn't come right away, you start thinking to yourself, "At this rate I'll be dead or broke or friendless before God gets around to doing anything." And you feel yourself begin to panic. That panic is, of course, the opposite of patience. Panic sets in when we begin to extrapolate what terrible things could happen if current trends continue.

The God of the Bible, however, is not the God of continuing current trends. Our transformational God delights in turning the tide and turning the tables. When you feel panic coming on, it's time to change your prayer. Instead of asking for deliverance first and then patience if you can't have deliverance, ask for patience to keep believing until the deliverance comes.

And then keep asking. Patient faith is not just asking God once and then sitting there heaving petulant sighs until he finally gets around to acting. When God responded to David—which was some extended time after the king had begun crying out for help—v. 1 says that God heard David's cry. Which indicates that David was still calling out to the Lord. His was a patient waiting, but it was also active waiting. He didn't try to take the place of God, but neither did he just say "Qué será, será."

There are several practical reasons why it might take God a while to transform your circumstances. Often he answers our calls for help, not in one fell swoop of miraculous deliverance, but providentially—that is, through arranging circumstances in a way that meets your need. If you find yourself in debt God could drop a lot of money in your lap or he could provide a better job. If he works in the latter, providential way, it might take a long time to pay off the debt. But one is no less God's provision than the other.

When God does choose to transform your circumstances miraculously, it could still take a while, because he often coordinates the timing to highlight his intervention. Have you ever noticed how often God comes through at the last minute?

When we were serving as missionaries, one autumn our family was split up. Cindi and Jennifer had gone back to Spain for the start of school in mid-September after spending the summer in the US, and I had stayed on until mid-November to do more fund raising. Our account was in arrears and we could not resume the ministry until after the deficit was erased. I had finished all my meetings with churches and individuals, but I was still \$4,500 short. And I was scheduled to leave the next week.

We had been separated for six weeks, and I was anxious to get home. But I called Cindi at the end of the week and tell her that if I didn't get the money by Sunday I'd have to change my ticket and just stay on until the money came in. So, we were both praying that the money would come from somewhere, but frankly didn't know where.

I went to church on Sunday morning. Out of the blue somebody walked up and handed me a check for \$2,000. That was wonderful, but I was still \$2,500 short, and the clock was ticking. Still praying, I went back to worship on Sunday evening. After the service, a couple told me that God had laid on their hearts to help, and they handed me a check for—guess how much? Without knowing how much I needed they had written the check for \$2,500!

Now, you've got to admit that that makes a lot more compelling story than if the money had just come in incrementally over five months—even though in either case it would have been God's provision. This way, however, my faith was stretched in the process. And I saw once again how God times his help to highlight his power.

Another reason why God delays his response is specifically to build our faith. When the answer is not immediate, second and third options come into play. Look at v. 4. "Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, who *does not* look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods." Implicit in David's statement is the fact that he had to overcome the temptation to take matters into his own hands or to trust in someone or something other than God.

David's experience showed him God's goodness, but he learned much more than that during his time of waiting. Jump ahead into verse 6. "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire—but my ears you have opened—burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require."

David discovered that God was not looking for a formulaic response. This was not a circumstance that could be resolved by offering a bigger or better sacrifice. The delay was not on account of his sins, so he couldn't speed it up by repentance. David had no bargaining leverage with God.

Rather, God was drawing his child into a deeper and qualitatively more intimate relationship. In verses 7-8 David relates how God's transformational experiences cause us to assimilate his Word in such a way that our very identity becomes intertwined with his desires for us. "Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come—it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart.'" David's waiting process allowed time for this inner transformation to ferment in a way that it would not and could not have done, had he simply summoned God like a genie from a bottle.

God is not inattentive. It doesn't take him long to recognize our need. And it wouldn't take him long to do something about that need—if that were his only concern. But because he is doing something very necessary *in* us at the same time he is doing something very necessary *for* us, the transformation of our circumstances must often await the transformation of ourselves. Because our external distress serves as a motivation to seriously seek the Lord.

The second principle of circumstantial transformation comes in verse 2. And that is this: *Real change is possible*. You are not consigned to a Seinfeldian existence, a succession of insignificant incidents that add up to absurdity. Both your inner world and your external circumstances are significant. You can experience real change on both fronts. And the two transformations, internal and external, are woven together in the same divine dynamic.

Psalm 40:2 begins: "He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire." We don't know what David was going through, but clearly it was serious—and, judging by this description, not too pleasant. This term "slimy pit" is kind of a tricky term, but a literal translation would be something like "pit of desolation." The NIV translators have chosen to render the term as "*slimy* pit," probably to emphasize the parallelism with "mud and

mire” in the second line. But regardless of the exact meaning of the expression, the pit in question is almost certainly the pit of the grave or *sheol*. The mud and slime indicate being stuck and possibly even sinking in a quicksand-like fashion.

David is not describing his physical location, however, but the state of his mind and his circumstances. Using a more modern metaphor, we might say that he had one foot in the grave, or, less delicately, that he was in very deep doo-doo.

Perhaps you’ve been there. Perhaps you know this state of mind, this set of circumstances, this sense of helpless dread. Maybe you’re feeling it right now. Perhaps a relationship is unraveling, and you feel powerless to make it right. Perhaps your health is out of control. Perhaps your finances or your career are on a downward spiral. Perhaps some other set of circumstances has you trapped. Well, I’ve got good news for you. Real change is possible.

Both circumstantially and emotionally David was slip-slidin’ away. And apparently that situation lasted for some time. But now, at long last, David says in the last part of verse 2: “He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.” On a rock. Secure as opposed to threatened. Stable as opposed to out of control.

What happened? He had a rescuer, someone stronger than himself, who pulled him to safety.

As believers, we are not victims of our circumstances, because God is in control. In fact, even unpleasant circumstances are pushing us in the direction God wants us to go—toward him. God uses our struggles to catapult us to greater levels of spiritual maturity, and in doing so we actually rise above our circumstances.

Therefore, your future is not limited by your own, natural means. Real change is possible, because God is faithful and willing and able to intervene on your behalf. But only if you will wait patiently on him.

My friend, Woody, was kind of a hillbilly. He had a high school education, but not a great one. Noun-verb agreement never quite agreed with him. After a stint in the military, he found himself working on the production line at General Motors.

The renegade son of a Pentecostal preacher, Woody was running from God. But his wife was a godly woman, and Woody's children started going to Sunday school on the church bus. And eventually God got a hold of Woody too.

His character began to change, but his circumstances still left a lot to be desired. An accident with a rotor tiller left his leg badly mangled. He missed a lot of work, and finances dried up.

But God was not done with Woody. His leg finally healed, and he returned to work, where he began to prosper, receiving various promotions. Before his early retirement Woody had achieved the highest level of management to which he could aspire without a college degree. They took him to Detroit to tell the big boys how he did it.

Woody became a fervent witness for Christ as well. And he got interested in international missions, becoming the missions director at my home church. Along the way he raised large sums of money for mission projects and was instrumental in launching a denominational church-planting movement in Vietnam, returning on several occasions to the land where he had served as a soldier in another life.

Is real change possible in Christ? Absolutely. In your eternal destiny? Certainly. In your character? You bet. But also in your circumstances. Like Woody, God wants to take you somewhere you have never been before. And he wants to do it in a way that leaves no doubt that it is his work.

It is this transformational dynamic that truly makes you a contagious Christian. We taught an adult Christian education class here last year on how to be a contagious Christian. It was a really helpful exercise, but it was mostly about how to spread the contagion rather than about becoming contagious in the first place. To be a contagious Christian you not only need to care about others, you not only need to be able to articulate the Christian message, you need to be experiencing God's transformation in your own life.

That's where I think the wheels sometimes fall off our Christian witness. There is nothing compelling taking place in our own lives that others can see and that we can't help but share. We fall into a Seinfeldian spirituality. A lot of pious activity that amounts to too very little.

Look at David's experience in v. 3. "He put a *new* song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God."

The new song that God put in his heart may be metaphorical, like we say we have a song in our heart when we're very happy. But notice that the "new song" is paralleled by the "hymn of praise" in the next line. That makes me think that David's "new song" might have been actual music. The fact that it is in his mouth and that many will see what God has done for him and find themselves changed tells us that he's not just thinking happy thoughts; he is also communicating how he feels about his experience.

When we are moved by what God has done for us, our creativity is engaged. We find ourselves looking for a new means of expression, a new wineskin, for the fresh outpouring of God's grace. I know that when my own creative expression of worship dries up, it usually signifies a corresponding hum-drumness in my experience of God. If you find yourself in a Seinfeldian spiritual slump, you're unlikely to have any fresh new ideas about how to express your moribund faith. So, checking your enthusiasm for worship is a good way to take your spiritual temperature.

According to the end of v. 3, the result of this transformational dynamic is that many will perceive, both through the evident change and our reaction to it, that something important is happening. "Many will see and fear the LORD and put their trust in him."

They will be drawn to this dynamic, because all of us, at some level, long for a touch from God. Those are the people that David is talking about, those who will fear the Lord, those who will gain a new respect for the power of God. Because of what he's doing in you and me. And, because of what they see, they will put their trust in him.

There is a kind of epilogue to the story I told you earlier about God's last-minute provision of \$4,500. Cindi was back in Spain, anxious for me to return and concerned with all the what-ifs. One day she was in the home of an unconverted friend named Virginia, talking out her troubles as the other woman worked in the kitchen. Finally, Virginia stopped her short. "If your God is as powerful as you keep saying, then what's \$4,500? Stop your bellyaching and have a little faith."

Cindi was pretty embarrassed. The connection she was having so much trouble making was patently obvious to her friend. A transformational God ought to be capable of transforming such a circumstance. Not surprisingly, God's eventual provision did prove

to be a powerful testimony to her. I don't know whether she has as yet put her faith in Christ, but this is the kind of moment that sticks with you until all the pieces of your faith journey come together.

As a congregation, we are looking to be more effective in our outreach. But if that outreach is to have an impact it must flow out of a transformational experience. If we are not being transformed, both inwardly and outwardly, then our contact with others will simply inoculate them against the power of God rather than draw them into it.

If you're like me, when you look back over the broad sweep of your personal history, you can see that God has, indeed, shown up. And, yet, if you're like me you're also concerned that God does not show up in your experience as often as you'd like. It sometimes feels like too much Seinfeldian sameness—and too little transformation.

How can this new year and beyond be different? How can we see God transform us and our circumstances and our world in new and wonderful ways? Well, God much more often shows up where he's most expected than where he's least expected. If we want to see God's power unleashed, we must expect God to change us and to change our circumstances. Not just hope or wish, but actually *expect*. So, we must invite him to intervene. And keep on expecting. And keep on inviting. Until he does.

“I waited patiently on the Lord,” says David, “and he turned to me and heard my cry.” That's what I want, and I hope that you do too. Not just a New Year's resolution that depends on my willpower and probably won't make it out of January, but a resolution in this New Year to seek God's transforming power in my life and in our life together.

So, let's not settle for some Seinfeldian spirituality, some much ado about nothing. Rather, let's invite God to do his transforming work, whatever it takes. So that something really will change, so that we might experience a fresh infusion of divine joy, and so that others might see and put their trust in the God who shows up.