

BEGINNING OF MINISTRY SERIES



PAPER 3

WHAT I WAS *Beginning* TO UNDERSTAND: IDENTITY, GOD'S WORD, AND TRANSFORMATION

*Looking back at what I understood then—
and how God has taught me
more deeply since.*



“Do not conform to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

ROMANS 12:2

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What I Was Beginning to Understand: Identity, God's Word, and Transformation
Beginning of Ministry Series — Paper 3

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This paper is part of the Beginning of Ministry Series, which looks back at the author's earliest ministry work and reflects on how her understanding of God's Word, identity in Christ, spiritual formation, discipleship, and ministry has developed over time.

Servant of God Christie
Transformed to Serve the Broken as a Servant of God

To God alone be the glory.



Introduction

The first paper in this series introduced my first sermon, *Changing Your Thoughts*, and explained why I chose to preserve that sermon as it was originally written and preached in 2022. This paper returns to that sermon for a different reason. I want to look back at what I was beginning to understand at that point in my walk with Christ and consider how continued study of God's Word has deepened, corrected, and expanded that understanding.

When I look back at *Changing Your Thoughts*, written on August 24, 2022, I see more today than I could see when I wrote it. At the time, I believed I was primarily learning how to replace negative thoughts with positive ones. Four years later, I can recognize that God was beginning to teach me something much deeper. Beneath what I understood then as changing my thoughts, I was beginning to learn who God is through His Word, who I am because I belong to Jesus Christ, and why what I believe must be brought under the authority of Scripture.

Some of the biblical truths that were beginning to shape me were already present in that first sermon. I was discovering that those who belong to Christ are made new (**2 Corinthians 5:17**), that our lives are now found in Him (**Galatians 2:20**), that through faith in Christ we become children of God (**Galatians 3:26**), and that we are saved by grace and created in Christ for the purposes God has prepared for us (**Ephesians 2:8–10**). I did not yet understand the theological depth of everything I was reading, but God's Word was beginning to give me a new foundation for understanding both Him and myself.

Looking back also allows me to recognize where my understanding was incomplete. In 2022, I was learning from Scripture while also being influenced by Christian books, sermons, and teachings that I did not yet have the biblical or theological foundation to evaluate carefully. Some things I taught in that first sermon I still believe today. Some I understand more deeply. Others I would explain differently because continued study of Scripture has corrected and refined my understanding.

This paper is not about criticizing who I was in 2022 or suggesting that I have now arrived. I was—and still am—being formed by God. Instead, I want to examine what was beginning to take shape: knowing God through Scripture, finding my identity in Christ, bringing my thoughts under the authority of His Word, remaining teachable, and understanding that biblical transformation is far greater than positive thinking.

One of the greatest changes in my understanding has been recognizing the larger work of spiritual formation.



Renewing the mind matters, but it is part of God's work of forming the whole person increasingly into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Transformation is not something I manufacture through positive thinking, determination, or self-improvement.

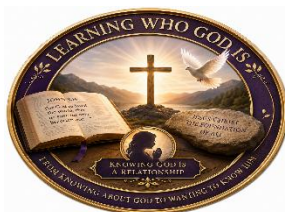
God is the One at work within His children, and He calls us to respond through faith, surrender, obedience, dependence upon the Holy Spirit, His Word, and life with the body of Christ.

When I look back now, I can see that I had much more to learn.

I still do.

But I can also see something I could not fully recognize then: God had already begun His work in me, and He was faithfully continuing it.

“And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.” Philippians 1:6



Learning Who God Is

From Knowing About God to Wanting to Know Him

When I prayed, *“God, show me who You really are,”* on July 30, 2021, I did not understand how much that prayer would change the direction of my life. I had been saved and had attended church for years. I believed in God, knew about Jesus, listened to sermons, and heard Scripture taught. Yet there is a difference between knowing information about God and personally seeking to know Him. Looking back, I can see that this was one of the first things God was beginning to teach me.

After accepting my pastor's challenge to read the New Testament in thirty days, I completed it in twenty-eight days and continued studying Scripture. For the first time, I was becoming intentional about opening God's Word for myself.



Instead of depending primarily on what someone else told me about God, I began asking what God had revealed about Himself in Scripture. That change became foundational to everything that followed.

One of the beliefs Scripture began confronting was my belief that God did not love me. For years, painful experiences and emotions had influenced the way I understood Him. When life hurt, I could interpret the pain as evidence that God did not care. When I experienced rejection, it could reinforce the belief that I was unwanted even by Him. Without realizing it, I had often allowed my circumstances and emotions to shape my understanding of God's character.

Scripture began challenging that foundation. In **John 3:16–17**, I encountered God's love demonstrated through the sending of His Son. **Romans 8:38–39** taught me that nothing can separate those who belong to Christ from the love of God revealed in Christ.

Ephesians 1:4–7 showed me God's grace, redemption, forgiveness, and adoption. I was beginning to understand that I could not determine who God is by interpreting Him through whatever I happened to be experiencing. **God's character must be understood according to what He has revealed about Himself.**

Jesus Christ Became the Foundation

As I continued reading Scripture, I also began understanding Jesus differently. I already knew that Jesus had died on the cross and risen again. I had heard the gospel and confessed Him as Savior. But I was beginning to understand more personally the significance of what Christ had accomplished.

Jesus had not come merely to help me become a better version of myself or teach me how to think more positively. He came to save sinners and reconcile us to God. Through His death and resurrection, He accomplished what I could never accomplish through determination, self-improvement, or good works. **Forgiveness, reconciliation with God, new life, and my identity as a believer were rooted in what Christ had done—not in what I could do for myself.**

That distinction became increasingly important. Christianity was not about adding Jesus to the life I had already created. My new life had its foundation in Him. The changes taking place in my thinking mattered, but they were not the center of Christianity. Jesus Christ was the center.



Beginning to Recognize the Holy Spirit's Work

My first sermon also reveals that I was becoming aware of the Holy Spirit's work within me. At the time, I described this simply. I wrote about listening to the Holy Spirit, allowing Him to work within me, and asking Him to help me change. I did not yet have a developed understanding of spiritual formation, but I was beginning to recognize an important truth:

God's work in my life was not merely external.

God was working within me.

Today, I understand more clearly that the Holy Spirit's work is not simply to help me accomplish whatever changes I have decided I want for myself. **His work is centered on Christ and God's purposes. Through the Spirit, God continues His transforming work within believers, forming us increasingly into the likeness of Jesus Christ.**

"So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image." 2 Corinthians 3:18

This helped me understand something that I could not have explained clearly in 2022. The ultimate goal of God's work in me is not simply that I become happier, more confident, more successful, or more positive. Those things cannot define spiritual maturity.

The goal is Christlikeness.

Knowing God Is a Relationship

Perhaps the most important thing I was beginning to understand was that knowing God is not merely acquiring information about Him. Reading Scripture was giving me knowledge, but God was also drawing me into a deeper relationship with Himself through Jesus Christ.

Jesus' teaching about abiding in Him would eventually become especially important to my understanding of spiritual formation.

"Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me. Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing." John 15:4–5



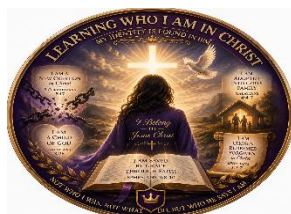
I cannot manufacture Christlikeness through willpower. Biblical knowledge is essential, but accumulating information alone cannot transform my heart. Jesus calls His followers to abide in Him. Scripture, prayer, surrender, obedience, and dependence upon the Holy Spirit are therefore not simply religious activities I perform to prove that I am a good Christian. They are part of living in relationship with God through Christ.

I did not understand all of this when I preached my first sermon. I was still at the beginning. But I was reading God's Word. I was praying. I was learning to listen. I was trying to obey. Most importantly, I wanted to know God.

Looking back, I can now see that the prayer *"God, show me who You really are"* was leading me somewhere much deeper than I understood at the time. God was teaching me not to define Him by my pain, circumstances, emotions, or assumptions. He was directing me to His Word, revealing Himself through Jesus Christ, and teaching me to depend upon the Holy Spirit.

Before God began changing how I understood myself, He was teaching me something even more foundational:

I needed to know who He is.



Learning Who I Am in Christ

My Identity Needed a New Foundation

As I was beginning to learn who God is, another question was becoming personal: **Who am I because I belong to Jesus Christ?** When I preached my first sermon in 2022, I did not yet understand the phrase *identity in Christ* as deeply as I do today, but that theme was already present. For years, painful experiences, other people's words, and my own emotions had shaped the way I saw myself. I had believed I was unloved, unworthy of love, unimportant, and unable to change. Those beliefs had become so familiar that they felt true simply because I had carried them for so long.



As I studied Scripture, I began to understand that my experiences could tell me what had happened to me, and my emotions could tell me how those experiences affected me, but neither had the authority to determine who I was before God.

If I belonged to Jesus Christ, my identity had to begin with Him.

My Past No Longer Has the Final Word

One of the first passages that became important to me was:

“This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” 2 Corinthians 5:17

In 2022, I understood this passage as evidence that because I belonged to Christ, my old life did not have to define me anymore. I still believe that. What I understand more clearly today is that becoming a new creation does not mean everything connected with the past immediately disappears. **Memories remain, painful emotions may still surface, and patterns of thinking may take time to change.** Christians continue to experience weakness, temptation, grief, suffering, and the consequences of living in a fallen world. Being made new in Christ does not require me to pretend those realities no longer exist. It means they no longer possess the final authority to tell me who I am.

Christ does.

Galatians 2:20 deepened that understanding.

“My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Galatians 2:20

Following Jesus is not simply adding Christianity to the person I already was. Paul speaks of being crucified with Christ and of Christ living in him. **My life now belongs to Christ.** Biblical identity therefore is not primarily about making myself feel better about myself. It calls me to surrender. The deeper prayer becomes, **“Lord, make my life increasingly reflect Jesus Christ.”**

I Belong to God's Family Through Christ

Another truth that affected me deeply was discovering what Scripture says about believers becoming children of God through faith in Jesus Christ.



"For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:26

When I read *Galatians 4:4–7* and its language of adoption and calling God *"Abba, Father,"* it spoke directly to places within me that had questioned whether I was loved or wanted.

"But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, 'Abba, Father.' Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir."

Galatians 4:4–7

I was beginning to understand something I desperately needed to **know I belonged to God**. Over time, my understanding of that truth became more centered on Christ.

My identity as God's child is not based on convincing myself that I am important or special.

It is not established by my goodness, accomplishments, education, ministry, obedience, or how strongly I happen to feel God's presence.

It is rooted in Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 1:4–7 also became important to me because of its language of being chosen, adopted, redeemed, and forgiven.

"Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins." *Ephesians 1:4–7*

As I continued studying *Ephesians*, two words became increasingly important:

in Christ.

- I am forgiven because of Christ.
- I am reconciled to God through Christ.
- I am adopted into God's family through Christ.
- I have new life in Christ.
- My hope is in Christ.
- Biblical identity begins with Jesus, not with me.



Identity Comes Before Service

Ephesians 2:8–10 became especially important to me because it helped me understand both the source of my salvation and the purpose God gives to those who belong to Christ:

“God saved you by grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.” Ephesians 2:8–10

In my first sermon, I focused especially on **verse 10** because I had struggled with believing that I had little value or purpose. Discovering that God had created me anew in Christ for good works helped me understand that my life had purpose. That truth remains important, but today I understand it more fully because **verse 10** cannot be separated from the grace described in **verses 8 and 9**.

I am saved by God’s grace through faith, not because of anything I accomplish. **The good works God has prepared are not what give me salvation, identity, or worth before Him.** They flow from the salvation and new life He has already given me in Christ.

I now recognize the danger of allowing usefulness to become the source of identity. It is possible to stop believing, **“I have no value because nobody needs me,” only to replace it with, “I have value because God can use me.”** Even that can make identity dependent upon accomplishment.

My identity must come before my service. I belong to Christ before I preach, write, teach, serve, encourage, or accomplish anything. What I do for God flows from who I already am in Christ; it does not create who I am.

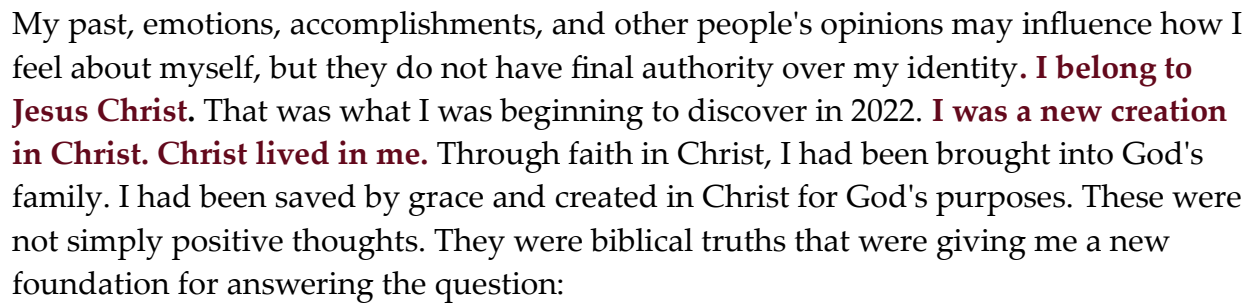
Service flows from identity. Identity does not flow from service.

Identity Is Received, Not Manufactured

In my first sermon, I was beginning to understand that negative beliefs should not define me. Today, I would take that one step further:

I do not get to define myself either. God does.

Biblical identity is not about replacing *“I am worthless”* with *“I am wonderful.”* It is not something I manufacture through positive declarations, self-esteem, accomplishments, or the opinions of other people. The better question is, **“What has God said is true of those who belong to Jesus Christ?”**

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From Positive Thinking to Biblical Truth

The main subject of my first sermon was changing negative thoughts into positive thoughts. That was the language I used in 2022 because it reflected how I understood what God was teaching me at the time. Looking back now, I can see something deeper beneath that message. I was beginning to recognize that not everything I thought or felt was necessarily true.

For much of my life, certain thoughts had become so familiar that I rarely questioned them.

- If I felt unwanted, I believed I was unwanted.
- If I felt worthless, I believed I had no value.
- If I felt unloved, I assumed I was not loved.

My experiences and emotions often became evidence for conclusions I accepted about myself, other people, and sometimes even God.

As I began seriously studying Scripture, however, God's Word challenged many of those conclusions. I was beginning to understand that a thought does not become true

simply because I have believed it for a long time or because an emotion makes it feel convincing.



Instead of automatically accepting everything I thought or felt, I was learning to ask a more important question:

What does God's Word say?

God's Word Became the Standard

Romans 12:2 was one of the central Scriptures in my first sermon because I was beginning to recognize the connection between transformation and the renewing of the mind.

“Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.” Romans 12:2

In 2022, I focused primarily on changing the way I thought. Today, I understand this passage more deeply. Paul is not simply telling believers to exchange negative thoughts for positive ones. He contrasts conformity to the patterns of this world with transformation through the renewing of the mind so that believers increasingly discern and live according to God's will.

That changes the goal.

The goal is not simply to **think better so that I can feel better.**

The goal is for God's truth to renew my thinking so that the way I understand, choose, and live increasingly reflects His will.

This helped me understand the difference between positive thinking and biblical thinking. A thought does not become true because it sounds encouraging, because I repeat it often enough, or because I want it to be true. God's Word determines the standard. Scripture comforts us, but it also teaches, corrects, convicts, exposes sin, calls us to repentance, and trains us to live according to God's ways. **2 Timothy 3:16–17**

The question therefore is not merely, *“Does this thought make me feel better?”*

The more important question is:

“Is this true according to God's Word?”

Learning to Examine My Thoughts

In my first sermon, I also used **2 Corinthians 10:3–5** when discussing the battle taking place in the mind.



“We are human, but we don’t wage war as humans do. We use God’s mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments. We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God. We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ.”

2 Corinthians 10:3–5

The instruction about taking thoughts captive and bringing them into obedience to Christ stood out strongly to me. At the time, I understood this primarily as fighting negative thoughts with Scripture. I still believe believers must examine their thinking under the authority of Christ, but today I would explain this more carefully.

Not every unpleasant, fearful, discouraging, or painful thought should automatically be attributed directly to Satan. Thoughts can arise from fears, memories, assumptions, habits, experiences, circumstances, sinful desires, or influences from the world around us. At the same time, Scripture clearly teaches that believers have a real spiritual enemy who deceives, tempts, and seeks to draw people away from truth. (**John 8:44; 1 Peter 5:8–9; Ephesians 6:10–18**)

I have learned that I do not need to determine the exact source of every thought before I know how to respond to it. Instead, I can examine what I am thinking by asking whether it agrees with Scripture, whether it reflects God's character as He has revealed Himself, and whether it leads me toward obedience to Christ or away from Him.

The purpose is not to become consumed with determining where every thought originated.

The purpose is to bring my thinking under the authority of Jesus Christ.

My Feelings Are Real, but They Are Not My Final Authority

I have also learned that painful emotions are not automatically evidence that something has gone wrong spiritually. Scripture gives many examples of faithful people experiencing grief, discouragement, fear, loneliness, sorrow, and anguish. Biblical faith does not require me to deny those emotions or pretend they do not exist.

Psalm 13: 1-2 helped me understand this because David honestly brought his anguish before God while continuing to trust Him.



I can tell God, *“I am hurting,”* without abandoning faith. I can acknowledge that I feel alone while remembering God's promise that He will not abandon His people.

(Hebrews 13:5)

I can admit that I do not understand what God is doing while still choosing to trust Him. (Proverbs 3:5–6)

This has become one of the most important distinctions in my spiritual growth:

My emotions are real, but they are not my final authority.

My emotions can reveal that I am hurting, afraid, discouraged, angry, or grieving. They deserve to be acknowledged honestly before God. But they do not have the authority to determine God's character, my identity in Christ, or what is ultimately true. I can bring what I feel to God while allowing His Word to remain the foundation for what I believe.

Scripture Shapes More Than My Thoughts

In my first sermon, I often described Scripture as a weapon for fighting negative thoughts. There is biblical truth in that language, but today I understand the role of God's Word much more broadly.

The Bible is not simply a collection of verses I search for whenever an unwanted thought appears. **Scripture reveals who God is, points us to Jesus Christ, exposes sin, teaches wisdom, corrects false beliefs, gives hope, and shapes how we understand ourselves, other people, and the world around us. (Psalm 119:105)**

I do not want to open Scripture only when I need a verse to answer something I am feeling. I want God's Word to be continually shaping the way I think and live before those moments come.

Scripture is not merely something I use to respond to difficult thoughts.

It is the foundation through which God continually shapes the way I understand and live my life.

Renewing the Mind Is a Process

In 2022, I sometimes made changing thoughts sound almost like a formula: identify the lie, find the truth, repeat the truth, believe the truth, and change the thought. There is value in recognizing false beliefs and intentionally returning to Scripture, but today I understand that transformation is often deeper and slower than a formula can describe.



Some truths I understood intellectually long before they became deeply rooted in the way I lived. Some lessons God has taught me repeatedly. Some patterns of thinking changed relatively quickly, while other areas have required years of continued surrender, correction, and dependence upon Him.

That does not mean God's Word has failed.

It means spiritual formation is a continuing process.

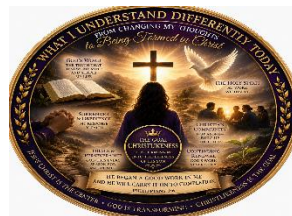
"And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns." Philippians 1:6

If I were preaching my first sermon today, I would explain its central message differently.

God is not merely teaching His children to become more positive thinkers. Through His Word and the work of the Holy Spirit, He renews our minds and brings what we believe increasingly into agreement with His truth.

In 2022, I thought I was primarily learning how to replace negative thoughts with positive ones. Looking back now, I can see that God was teaching me something much greater:

I was learning to bring what I believed under the authority of His Word.



What I Understand Differently Today: From Changing My Thoughts to Being Formed in Christ

When I preached *Changing Your Thoughts* in 2022, I had been seriously studying God's Word for only a little over a year. I was excited about what I was learning and eager to share it, but I was still developing the biblical foundation needed to evaluate everything I heard, read, and believed.



Four years later, I can recognize both the biblical truths that were beginning to take root and areas where my understanding needed correction.

I still believe Jesus Christ changes lives, believers are made new in Him, our minds need renewal, God's Word must have authority over what we believe, and the Holy Spirit works within God's people. What has changed is how I understand those truths and the larger purpose of God's transforming work. Growth has taught me that remaining teachable sometimes requires being willing to say, **"I would not teach that the same way today."**

From Positive Declarations to Trusting What God Has Said

In my first sermon, I had been influenced by teachings emphasizing positive declarations and **"I am"** statements. I suggested that continually speaking and believing something could eventually cause it to become true. I would not teach that today.

Scripture teaches that our words matter. They can encourage or wound, communicate wisdom or foolishness, and build others up or tear them down. (Proverbs 18:21; Ephesians 4:29)

But biblical faith is not faith in my ability to speak something into existence. **Biblical faith is faith in God.** I do not speak Scripture to make something become true. I trust Scripture because what God has revealed is already true.

The authority belongs to God, not to my declaration.

From Using Verses to Understanding Scripture in Context

I would also handle Scripture more carefully. In my original sermon, I used *Proverbs 23:7—particularly the familiar wording, "as he thinketh in his heart, so is he"*—to support the idea that what someone continually thinks and says will eventually determine what happens in that person's life. I would not use that passage to support that conclusion today.

Continued study has taught me to consider context: who is speaking, who is being addressed, what comes before and after a verse, what the biblical author is communicating, and how a passage fits within the larger teaching of Scripture.

(Proverbs 23:7; 2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Timothy 3:16–17)

I do not want to search the Bible merely for verses that support what I already believe. I want Scripture to teach me and, when necessary, correct me.

God's Word does not need to conform to what I believe.

What I believe must be brought under the authority of God's Word.



From Simple Answers About Suffering and Healing to Trusting God

My understanding of suffering and healing has also become more careful. In 2022, some of my statements could imply that difficult experiences will necessarily make life better afterward or that God causes particular suffering specifically to make someone better.

Scripture teaches that God can work through suffering and use trials in the formation of His people, but that does not mean everything that happens is itself good.

(Romans 5:3–5; James 1:2–4; Romans 8:28)

Likewise, **I still believe God heals, Jesus is compassionate, and believers should bring their needs before Him in prayer.** But I would no longer use one biblical healing account to promise that everyone who sincerely desires healing will receive it in the way or timing they desire. **(Mark 1:40–42; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10)**

Sometimes God changes the circumstance. Sometimes He gives grace to endure it. Sometimes I simply do not know why something has happened. Faith does not require me to invent an explanation. I can say, **“God, I do not understand, but I will continue trusting You.”**

From Self-Improvement to God's Transforming Work

Perhaps the greatest change in my understanding concerns transformation itself. My first sermon emphasized what I needed to do: change my thoughts, reject lies, repeat truth, develop new habits, and make better choices. Personal responsibility and obedience matter, but I now understand that spiritual formation is not a self-improvement project.

“Dear friends, you always followed by instructions when I was with you. And now that I am away, it is even more important. Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.” **Philippians 2:12–13**

I participate through surrender, obedience, prayer, Scripture, repentance, perseverance, and faithful following of Christ. But I cannot transform myself into the image of Jesus through determination or willpower.

God is the One at work within me.

My responsibility is not to manufacture transformation but to respond faithfully to God's transforming work.



From Feeling Better to Becoming More Like Christ

In 2022, I focused heavily on becoming more positive, confident, and free from destructive thinking. Those changes can matter, but they are not the ultimate goal of Christian spiritual formation. **(Romans 8:29; Galatians 5:22–25)**

“So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.” 2 Corinthians 3:18

The goal is Christlikeness.

God's transforming work reaches beyond how I think about myself. He is forming how I love, forgive, respond when I am hurt, endure suffering, resist temptation, use my words, serve others, surrender my desires, and obey when obedience is difficult.

The question is no longer simply, *“Do I feel better than I used to?”*

A deeper question is, **“Is my life increasingly reflecting Jesus Christ?”**

From a Formula to a Life of Dependence on Christ

I also understand that spiritual formation cannot be reduced to a formula.

“Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me. Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:4–5

Transformation happens within an ongoing life with Christ. God uses His Word to teach and correct me.

- Prayer draws me into dependence upon Him.
- The Holy Spirit works within me.
- Obedience puts truth into practice.
- Repentance turns me back when I wander. Trials can expose what is within me and develop perseverance.

Some lessons have taken years. Some truths I understood intellectually long before I consistently lived according to them. Spiritual formation is not a straight line toward becoming stronger and needing God less.



It is a life of continuing dependence upon Christ.

From an Individual Journey to Life in the Body of Christ

Finally, I understand more deeply that God did not design His people to grow alone. My first sermon focused primarily on my personal relationship with God, Bible reading, thoughts, and what God was doing within me. Those things matter, but biblical spiritual formation is not entirely private. **(Hebrews 10:24–25; Galatians 6:2)**

“Now these gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standards of Christ. Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won’t be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of the body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.”

Ephesians 4:11–16

God uses His people in the formation of His people. We encourage, teach, pray for, serve, correct, strengthen, and bear one another's burdens. My relationship with God is personal, but following Christ was never intended to be lived in isolation.

Looking back, I no longer see *Changing Your Thoughts* simply as a sermon about overcoming negative thinking. I see the beginning of something I could not yet fully explain.

God was teaching me to know Him through His Word, find my identity in Christ, submit what I believed to biblical truth, remain teachable when correction was needed, depend upon the Holy Spirit, and understand transformation as His continuing work of forming His people into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

I had much to learn then, and I still have much to learn today. **Spiritual maturity does not mean reaching a point where God no longer needs to correct me. It means remaining teachable when He does.**

The woman who preached that first sermon was learning.

The woman writing this paper is still learning.



What Changed Between 2022 and 2026

When I compare what I understood in 2022 with what I understand today, I can see that God did not discard what I was beginning to learn; **He deepened it.** I was right to recognize that my thoughts mattered and that God's Word needed to shape the way I thought. What I did not yet understand was how much larger biblical transformation really is.

**In 2022, I tended to understand transformation in a simpler way:
negative thought → God's Word → positive thought → changed life**

My attention was primarily on identifying harmful thoughts, replacing them with biblical truth, and learning to think differently so that I could begin living differently.

**By 2026, my understanding had become much broader:
life in Christ → God's Word → work of the Holy Spirit → surrender and obedience
→ Christian community → trials and perseverance → continuing renewal →
increasing Christlikeness**

This is not a formula or a fixed sequence that every believer experiences in exactly the same way. It is a picture of what I have come to understand about spiritual formation.

Transformation begins with life in Jesus Christ.

God's Word continually shapes and corrects us. The Holy Spirit works within us. We respond through surrender, obedience, repentance, and dependence upon Christ. God also uses His people, trials, and perseverance as He continues forming us.

The greatest change in my understanding can therefore be stated simply.

In 2022, I was primarily asking:

“How can God's Word change the way I think?”

Today, I am asking:

“How is God forming my whole life to become increasingly like Jesus Christ?”

Renewing the mind still matters, but it is no longer the whole picture. It is part of God's greater work of transforming the whole person.

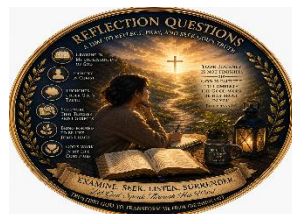
Jesus Christ is the center. God is the One doing the transforming work. Christlikeness is the goal.



Conclusion — What I Was Beginning to Understand

When I look back at my first sermon from where I stand today, I can see that God was doing much more than teaching me how to change negative thoughts. He was teaching me who He is, showing me that my identity is found in Jesus Christ, and teaching me to bring what I believed under the authority of His Word. I did not understand everything correctly in 2022, and there are things I would explain differently today, but I am grateful that God continued teaching me. I do not need to erase where I started in order to recognize growth. That first sermon shows an honest beginning, and this paper shows some of the ways God has deepened, corrected, and expanded my understanding since then.

I also understand now that I am still being formed. I have not arrived, and I still need God's Word, the work of the Holy Spirit, correction, surrender, obedience, and continued dependence upon Jesus Christ. **Philippians 1:6** reminds me that God began the work, God has continued the work, and God is not finished with me yet. As I look back, I can also see that even while God was working in me, He was beginning to turn my attention toward others. I wanted what He was teaching me to help someone else. That desire would become an important part of the next stage of my journey and leads directly into Paper 4 — *The Seeds of a Calling: From Personal Transformation to Serving Others*.



Reflection Questions

Before moving on from this paper, take some time to think honestly about what God may be showing you through your own journey. My understanding in 2022 was still developing, and God has continued teaching, correcting, and forming me through His Word. Your journey will not look exactly like mine, but every follower of Jesus has areas where God is still teaching and transforming them.

These questions are not meant to have perfect answers. Use them as an opportunity to slow down, pray, open God's Word, and consider where He has already worked and where He may still be working in you.

1. How has your understanding of God grown?

When you look back at your relationship with God, can you recognize ways your understanding of Him has changed or deepened? Are there things you once believed about God that His Word has corrected?

Scriptures to Consider: **John 17:3; Romans 11:33–36**

What God Is Asking You to Consider: Think about whether your understanding of God comes primarily from Scripture or from your experiences, emotions, circumstances, or what other people have told you. Ask God to continue showing you who He truly is through His Word.

2. What are you allowing to define who you are?

Are your past experiences, emotions, accomplishments, failures, or other people's opinions influencing the way you see yourself more strongly than what God says about those who belong to Christ?

Scriptures to Consider: **2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 3:26; Ephesians 2:8–10**

What God Is Asking You to Consider: Examine where you are receiving your identity. Your past may explain some of what you have experienced, but it does not have the final authority to define you. If you belong to Christ, learn to understand yourself through your relationship with Him.

3. Are there thoughts or beliefs that need to be brought under God's truth?

Have you accepted something as true simply because you have thought it for many years, felt it deeply, or experienced something that seemed to confirm it?

Scriptures to Consider: **Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 10:5**

What God Is Asking You to Consider: Bring your thoughts honestly before God. Ask whether what you believe agrees with Scripture. Do not simply replace a negative thought with a positive one; seek what is actually true according to God's Word.

4. Are you allowing Scripture to teach and correct you?

When you read the Bible, are you willing for God's Word to challenge something you already believe, or do you sometimes look only for Scriptures that confirm what you want to believe?

Scriptures to Consider: **2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Timothy 3:16–17**

What God Is Asking You to Consider: Approach Scripture with humility and a willingness to learn. Spiritual growth sometimes requires admitting that something you once believed or understood needs to be corrected or deepened.

5. Where is God forming you to become more like Jesus Christ?

Can you recognize areas where the Holy Spirit has already produced growth in your character? Where might God still be calling you to surrender, repent, obey, forgive, endure, or trust Him more deeply?

Scriptures to Consider: **Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 5:22–25**

What God Is Asking You to Consider: Do not measure transformation only by whether you feel better or struggle less. Ask whether your life is increasingly reflecting the character of Jesus Christ in the way you love, respond, obey, forgive, serve, and relate to others.

6. What has this paper helped you recognize about your own journey with God?

After reading about what I understood in 2022 and what God continued teaching me, what have you recognized about yourself? Where can you see that God has already been working, and where do you still need Him to teach, correct, strengthen, or transform you?

Scriptures to Consider: **Philippians 1:6; Philippians 2:12–13**

What God Is Asking You to Consider: Your spiritual journey is not finished. Do not become discouraged because there are still areas where you need to grow. Look for evidence of God's faithfulness, remain teachable, and continue trusting Him with the work He has not yet completed.

Take time with these questions. You do not need to answer them all at once. Bring them before God in prayer, read the Scriptures in their context, and allow the Holy Spirit to show you what He wants you to see.



A Prayer for You

Father,

I pray for the person reading these words. You know where they are in their relationship with You, what they believe, what they question, and where they still need Your truth. Draw them closer to You through Jesus Christ. Give them a hunger for Your Word and wisdom to understand it faithfully. When thoughts, emotions, experiences, or the words of others compete with Your truth, help them return to what You have revealed. Remind them that their identity is not something they must earn or prove; for those who belong to Christ, it is found in Him.

Holy Spirit, continue Your transforming work within them. Correct what is false, strengthen them in weakness, and help them obey. Keep their eyes on Jesus and form His character within them. May they know You more deeply, trust You more fully, and increasingly reflect Christ. May all You accomplish in their life bring glory to You.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

My Prayer of Thanks to God

Father,

As I look back at my first sermon, I thank You for what You began teaching me and for how faithfully You have continued that work. Thank You for drawing me to Your Word and showing me who You are. Thank You for Jesus Christ—for salvation, grace, forgiveness, new life, and an identity rooted in Him. Thank You also for correcting me. There were things I did not understand then and would explain differently today. Keep me humble, teachable, and willing to let Your Word continually shape what I believe.

Holy Spirit, continue renewing my mind, shaping my heart, strengthening my obedience, and forming me into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

I still have much to learn. Keep me seeking You, depending upon You, and following wherever You lead. You began this work. You have continued this work. And I trust You with what is still ahead. To You alone be the glory.

In Jesus' name, **Amen.**

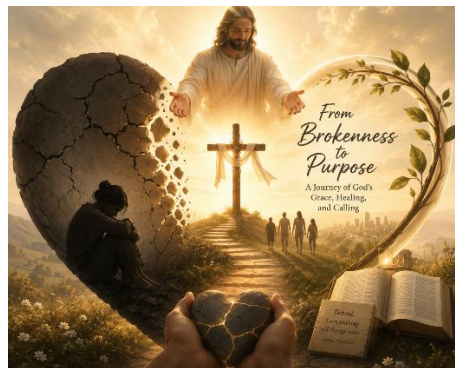
Prayerfully prepared by

Christie Johnson

Christie Johnson

Servant of God

"Pointing people to the hope, healing, and transformation found in Jesus Christ."



Continue the Journey

"So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us."

— 2 Corinthians 5:20

God's work in us is never meant to end with us.

As I began learning who God is, discovering my identity in Christ, and experiencing His transforming work in my own life, something else was beginning to develop—a desire to take what God was teaching me and use it to help someone else.

I did not fully understand it in 2022, but the first seeds of ministry were already beginning to appear.

The journey continues in:

Paper 4 — *The Seeds of a Calling: From Personal Transformation to Serving Others*

God was transforming me, but He was also beginning to turn my eyes toward the people He would call me to serve.

