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IS SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION *REALLY* POSSIBLE?

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answer to the question above is an emphatic yes! Let me briefly tell you a story that illustrates why.

In June of this year, I retired as vice president of the C.S. Lewis Institute and director of the Washington Area C.S. Lewis Fellows program, a role I had filled for nine years. Prior to that,

I had served for twelve years as president. Before coming to the Institute, I was copastor of an interracial church and, even earlier, was in campus ministry. That profile sounds normal enough.

But here's the backstory. I was a white teenager in the deep South who came of age in the early 1960s, just as the civil rights movement was gathering momentum. Society was in turmoil as the federal government implemented court-ordered desegregation plans in the public schools. I became very angry about the changes in my high school and began to read racist, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in literature that was being circulated on campus. Soon I met those who were distributing the material. This led to a process of indoctrination into far-right ideology that would eventually have tragic consequences for me and others.

My anger grew into hatred for black people, Jews, liberals, and communists — people I saw as enemies of God, America, and the southern way of life. By my early twenties, my hatred had led me to become involved with the most violent right-wing terrorist organization in America at the time, Mississippi's White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. One night, an accomplice and I were ambushed by a police SWAT team as we attempted to bomb the home of a Jewish businessman. My accomplice was killed, and I was so badly wounded that doctors gave me only forty-five minutes to live.



It has been almost fifty years since I met Jesus in that prison cell. Over those years, God has been steadily working in my life, helping me to change — to become more like Jesus.



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Miraculously I survived my injuries and was later tried and sentenced to thirty years in prison. But I had learned nothing from my experiences; about six months after entering prison, I escaped with two other inmates, intending to resume my activities. But a couple of days later, another SWAT team found me and my accomplices, one of whom was killed in the barrage of gunfire. Had the man who was killed not relieved me early from lookout duty, I would have been the one who died.

Back in prison, I was confined to a six-by-nine-foot cell in the maximum security unit. To escape the boredom of being locked up alone twenty-four hours a day, I began to read almost continuously. At first, it was racist, anti-Semitic books, which reinforced my extremist beliefs. Then, unexpectedly, my interest shifted to classical philosophy — Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. This led to an intellectual awakening and a search for truth and self-understanding that eventually took me to the New Testament. Through reading the Gospels, I discovered the truth I was seeking in the person of Jesus Christ. I was particularly stuck when I read, “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” (Matt. 16:26).¹ Under conviction of my sins, I was brought to repentance and faith and trusted my life to Christ in wholehearted surrender.

The next morning, I awoke with three strong desires in my heart: to read the Bible, to pray, and to live for God. As the apostle Paul had said, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). These desires were characteristic of that change. And so was the love that replaced racial and ethnic hatred in my heart. Hours of daily Bible reading fed these changes and helped fuel the beginnings of spiritual transformation. It also stimulated the desire for a deeper understanding of the Christian faith and an interest in theology and



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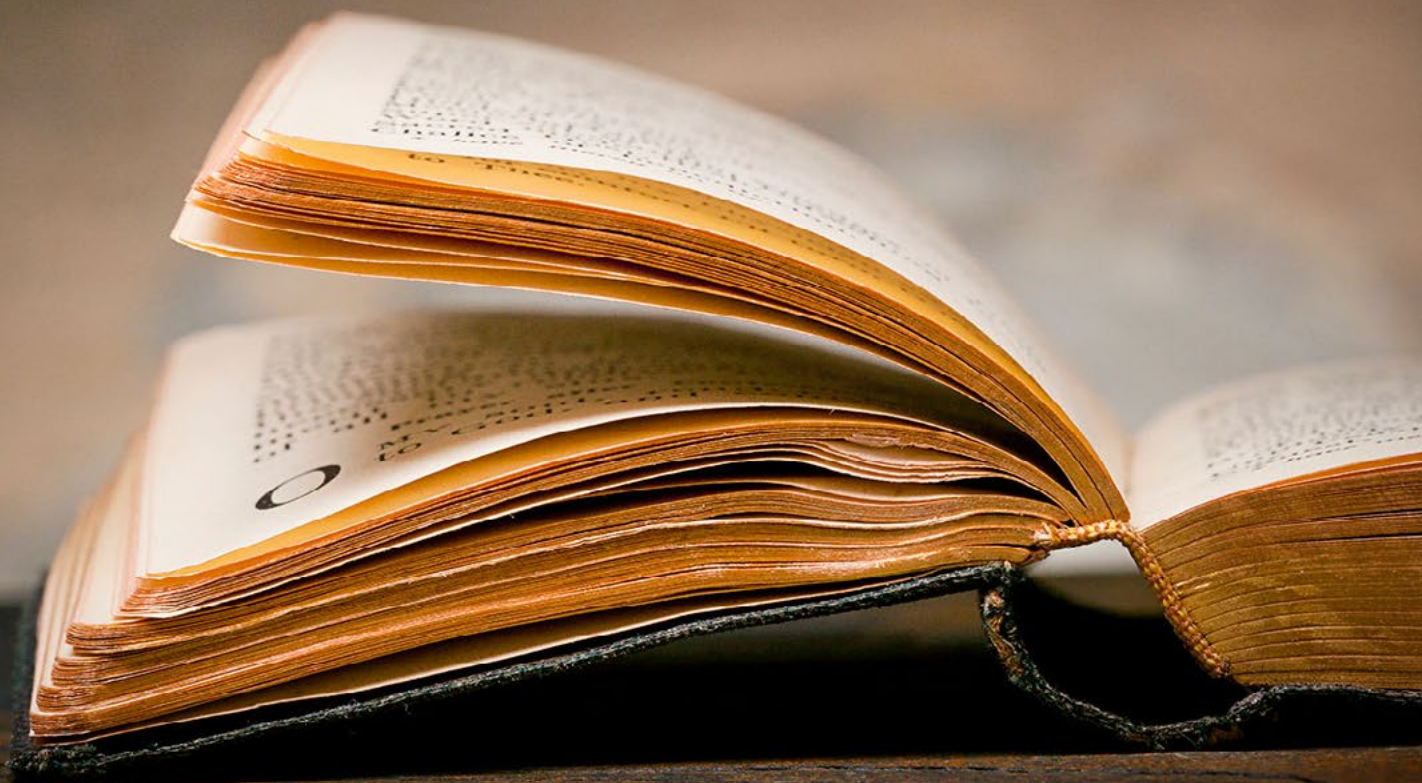
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apologetics. It was here that I first encountered the works of C.S. Lewis — books such as *Mere Christianity*, *Miracles*, *The Problem of Pain*, among others. The works of Lewis were formative in my thinking and would continue to be so for many years to come. Other writers also had a major impact on me — Louis Berkhof, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, J.I. Packer, John Stott, Andrew Murray, Thomas à Kempis, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to name a few. Two years of extensive daily Bible reading and the study of Christian classics helped me develop a solid foundation in the faith.

Fast forwarding a bit, after serving eight years in prison, a near miraculous set of circumstances opened the door for me to be released from prison to attend the University of Mississippi. At the age of twenty-nine, I was now eager to prepare myself to serve God in some way, and I gave myself to my studies with diligence. I also became part of a good church, where I could experience weekly worship, teaching, and fellowship. This helped accelerate my spiritual growth. Later I moved to the Washington, D.C., area and eventually went to seminary, earning a master's degree and later a doctoral degree. Along the way, doors opened for me to serve God in campus ministry, then pastoral ministry, and finally at the C.S. Lewis Institute.

It has been almost fifty years since I met Jesus in that prison cell. Over those years, God has been steadily working in my life, helping me to change — to become more like Jesus. It hasn't been quick, and it hasn't always been easy. There have been temptations, trials and tribulations, some of which I overcame and others I failed. There have been ups and downs, twists and turns along the way. And there have been painful sorrows to endure. But through it all, there have been many joys and blessings from God's generous hand. His grace has truly been sufficient for me. And He has patiently, lovingly kept calling me to "come further up, come further in." I still have a long way to go, for it is

He is the only way to God: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).





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a lifelong journey, but I am thankful for the progress made thus far by God's grace. That is why I can say without hesitation that spiritual transformation is certainly possible. Not only is it possible; it is unquestionably God's agenda for each of His children, for He intends that we "be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29).

So in spite of the challenges and difficulties of the transformation process,

we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:17–18)

Such transformation is not just for the few. It is for everyone who really wants it, even the worst of people, as I once was. History is full of examples of notorious sinners who have been transformed by Jesus Christ. Think of the apostle Paul, a violent religious extremist; Augustine, a pagan philosopher and sex addict; Francis of Assisi, a rich playboy. More recently, C.S. Lewis was a convinced atheist, and Chuck Colson was a ruthless political operative. It is also for ordinary people who have not been saved, including those church people who make professions of faith and believe they are Christians but whose lives have never changed. (This is a major reason throughout history why people don't believe Christian faith changes people in a positive way.)

If you long for this — if you really want to become more like Jesus — cry out to God with a sincere heart. He will help you. The first step for everyone is repentance and faith. That is, to recognize and turn from your sins to Jesus Christ and trust Him as your Savior and Lord. He says, "Come to me, all who labor and are



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heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28–30). He is the only way to God: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

If you have been born again, your next step is clear: with gratitude to God for His grace and love, “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1). This means giving yourself to Him wholeheartedly, body and soul, holding back nothing. It is a surrender to God’s love and a commitment to pleasing Him through joyful obedience to His will. This launches the process of transformation, and you will need to reaffirm it daily. The process moves forward as we take the necessary initiative: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). This involves forsaking the values, attitudes, and behaviors of the fallen world and seeking the renewal of our minds through earnest engagement with the Word of God, the Spirit of God and the people of God. Our goal in doing so is to develop the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5–8), our Savior, Lord and great High Priest. And as we walk this path through life with our brothers and sisters in Christ, “we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). ■

NOTES

¹ Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.



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Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of — throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself...



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If we let Him — for we can prevent Him, if we choose — He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a... dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright, stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness.

— *C.S. Lewis*



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1

In his article, Tom Tarrants argues that spiritual transformation is for everyone who really wants it, notorious sinners and also “ordinary people who have not been saved, including those church people who make professions of faith and believe they are Christians but whose lives have never changed.” How might a person prayerfully consider whether they are in the latter group of people?



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2

Do you long to become more like Jesus? If so, and considering the article, what steps have you taken? What would you like, with God's help, to do next?



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Thomas Tarrants is President Emeritus of the C.S. Lewis Institute. After serving twelve years as president and nine years as vice President, he retired from his position as Vice President for Ministry and Director, Washington Area Fellows Program, with CSLI in June 2019. Tom holds a Master of Divinity Degree, as well as a Doctor of Ministry Degree in Christian Spirituality. He is an ordained minister in the Evangelical Church Alliance and a member of the Evangelical Theological Society. Going forward, Tom will be spending his time writing, mentoring, consulting and traveling. His life story is told in *Consumed by Hate, Redeemed by Love*, published by Thomas Nelson Publishers.



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RECOMMENDED READING



Thomas A. Tarrants, *Consumed by Hate, Redeemed by Love: How a Violent Klansman Became a Champion of Racial Reconciliation* (Thomas Nelson, 2019)

As a high school student in the 1960s, Tom Tarrants was seduced by extremist ideology and radicalized during the social upheaval of the era. Before long, he became involved in the reign of terror

spread by Mississippi's dreaded White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, described by the FBI as the most violent rightwing terrorist organization in America. Shot multiple times and arrested by police after an attempt to bomb the home of a Jewish leader in Meridian, MS, Tom was sentenced to thirty years in the Mississippi State Penitentiary. After recovering from near-fatal wounds, Tarrants and two other inmates escaped. An FBI SWAT team tracked them down, killing one of the convicts, and Tom spent the next three years alone in a 6'x9' cell. Tom began a search for truth that led him to the Bible and a reading of the gospels, resulting in his conversion to Christianity and liberation from racial hate and violence.

After serving eight years of a thirty-five-year sentence, Tom attended college, moved to Washington, DC, and became co-pastor of a racially mixed church. He went on to earn a doctorate and became the president of the C.S. Lewis Institute, where he devoted himself to helping others become wholehearted followers of Jesus. A dramatic story of radical transformation, this book demonstrates that hope is not lost even in the most tumultuous of times, such as our own.