
CHAPTER 1

JESUS, THE DESIRE-FILLER



“I have this woman who’s coming to the workshop who can’t think of even *one* significant thing she’s accomplished in her life,” my assistant said plaintively. “I’m ready to just throw up my hands and give up—can *you* talk to her?”

My first encounter with Margaret sticks in my mind because she was so stuck. The assignment she was struggling with was to list two of her greatest accomplishments. After a lifetime trying to serve a

God of right, wrong and rules, and a ten-year struggle with depression piled on top, she couldn't point to anything in her life that felt worthy of praise, let alone a great accomplishment.

A year after our initial meeting, Margaret is one of the most happy, effervescent, excited-about-life people in my world. An encounter with Jesus that filled her deepest desires changed everything for her. But I'll let Margaret tell her own story:

“At the conclusion of the Transforming the Heart workshop in November, I was overwhelmed and entirely unable to articulate my thoughts and feelings. I want to try now.

“Over a decades-long process, I had begun to see that all of my efforts to change me and my heart from a cerebral approach had met with failure. Every time. When I first read about the workshop, I knew it was what I needed. And it scared me... I went shopping for waterproof mascara, and prepared for a nasty, messy heart transformation!

“I was horrified when I realized that our ‘accomplishments’ were to be shared in front of the whole group. Ashamed. Embarrassed. All the years of being desperate to please God, and I could point to nothing that demonstrated I had.

“All my life I have heard that God loves me. And I believed it. But at that workshop, for the first time in my life, I saw God smile at me. I SAW HIM SMILING AT ME! The sun came out, and I began to skip in the sunbeam! And I have not been the same.

“Nothing about life looks as it did. I had long since ceased to hope that I could re-align the messy Rubik's cube of my life. But He smiled, and in a moment every piece shifted into place. I am whole. I am still on the journey, but I am whole.

“In that encounter with him... there was all this ‘click, click, click’ and all the pieces came together. The messiness that I walked into that workshop with became order and peace and satisfaction. Seeing His delight in [my growth] process, and in processing together, introduced hope and joy and strength into my future. I can be at peace today, only because He and I are here together, and doing it together is what it is all about!

“And all that happened because I had an encounter with God. We don't change except for an encounter with God, and I still didn't get that before the



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workshop. I was still taking the cerebral approach.

“It is only an encounter with God that changes me, and I didn’t know how to do that until I learned to talk to him about the relationship and what was going on in me and his heart... it was no longer praying the to-do list with God, but just talking with him about our hearts’ desires.

“I was raised in the church, but I was never taught how to allow Jesus into my heart in a way that changes me, or how to interact with Jesus, the Father, and Holy Spirit in the intimate ways we experienced there. Everything that was missing beforehand—the joy, the anticipation of life, the excitement—it came back. Those were all pieces in my life when I was a kid, and somehow they had all been crushed or left out. And now they are back.

“I still have challenges in life, but they are hardly affecting me because my hope isn’t being robbed and my joy isn’t being robbed. Life is so exciting and so fun, and I didn’t know that for an awful lot of years. I had sweet moments, but my life was mostly about fear and avoiding pain instead of living in love. But no longer is my life a scary and sad place. I have encountered God again and again—and He likes me! Wow!

“In the end, I didn’t need my waterproof mascara. No ‘ugly’ cry. But there were interactions with my Father that largely bypassed my mind and my emotions, and changed my heart. Thank you God!”

Margaret’s life was transformed by one simple, beautiful touch: experiencing God smiling at her. No one prayed for her, gave her counseling or coached her through her encounter. We simply invited her to connect with God, believed in her ability to encounter him, and created an environment where she could meet him in her own

Do you want to meet the God who is smiling at you? Take one minute to ask him this question and listen, and then whatever you hear, see, or whatever comes into your heart, jot it down:

- *“Jesus, what do you like about me?”*

Now, don’t doubt yourself or question what you received: just write it down. Jesus believes that his sheep (that’s you) hear his voice. You do hear him. Just believe about yourself what Jesus believes about you!

heart. And he came, and spoke to Margaret's deepest desires for goodness, approval and love.¹ Now she continues to meet him in her heart's desire and be transformed every day.

That's Father's invitation: to experience desire fulfilled every day, and be transformed by it. It's a simple, amazingly good change plan that (surprisingly) is little known. Few have really delved into studying desire, how the heart functions, or the *process* of transforming the heart.

The invitation is to experience desire fulfilled every day, and be transformed by it.

And the process matters. Change is a partnership between God and me. For it to work, I have to understand what God's part is and what is mine. I need to get comfortable enough working together with him on my heart that I don't freeze up whenever I see something wrong in me, or spend my lifetime using work, humor, TV or other defenses to distract me from really looking at my own brokenness. I have to become deeply convinced of God's affection towards me—deep in my heart, not just my head—because I have *experienced* him saying he loves me over and over again, particularly in my broken places. I need to encounter love to the point that I feel free to abandon using self-discipline to give me the sense of being good enough or worthy of the approval that I crave. Then, instead of trying to change myself by pasting the Band-Aid of willpower on my wrong behavior, I'll instinctively accept the invitation to come to him broken, receive the power that comes from hearing him speak a word of life to my deepest desires, and relax into the change process he started before I was even aware of what he was doing.

Think of Margaret's example. Not understanding where the border between God's part and her part was, she took it on herself to change, and reaped a harvest of guilt and self-condemnation when that didn't work. She did not know how to come to God as she was, sit in his lap and share her day. She didn't know he was the change-initiator. Although the real Father was smiling at her, the God of her belief system never smiled. So she stayed trapped in a box with an angry God, freezing up in guilt every time her pain or failure came to the surface. Interestingly, it was only when she was given the assignment to list her greatest accomplishments and she was forced

1 To learn how to pray out of your deep desires, skip ahead to Chapter 7.

to acknowledged the utter failure of her own efforts to change, that God's approval was able to penetrate her heart and fill her. And then she changed, practically without effort, *because he changed her*.

The vast majority of Christians are much like Margaret. We don't understand the *process* of how God transforms the heart: the dance of change that Jesus and I dance together. And even where biblical knowledge brings a rational-brain, theological knowing of how God works, actually putting it into practice requires an intimate, experiential, daily touch of Jesus, heart to heart, that most Christians lack. *Transformational change requires both rationally knowing and emotionally experiencing the goodness of God*. Rational belief alone cannot provide the power to drive the change process. Mere knowing leaves you clear on what you need to do but without the ability to do it.

The invitation brings together the clarity of rational knowing with the power of desire fulfilled. Understanding the ways of the heart as well as the mind—getting Jesus fully into both sides of your brain—can easily double your effectiveness in bringing deep, lasting significant change to those you lead, and allow you to do it with half the effort. Or let's go big: what if the power of desire fulfilled let you see *ten times* the transformation, or a *hundred-fold* gain in the amount of truly life-changing moments you witness? What would happen if *everyone* you met experienced Father smiling at them?

That's what this book is all about. I've coached close to 1000 leaders one-on-one through the process of heart transformation. Over the years, I've built sophisticated systems and taught key skills for how to bring change. But the longer I work with people, the more I depend on the simple process of inviting others to experientially encounter Jesus touching their deepest desires. Amazing breakthroughs that used to take months of coaching get done in an hour. Jesus says the most incredible, unpredictable, hilarious things—things I never would have thought of or anticipated—and his words reach in and touch the heart in ways I could never do. The results are an order of magnitude better than what I did before, plus Jesus does all the heavy lifting. I like that.

Brian's Story

Last week I met for the first time with a heartbroken ministry

leader whose wife of 20 years had just left him. After half an hour of talking about the situation we began to explore what he believed about himself. “I feel like a failure as a man and a husband,” he lamented. “I’ve failed in my marriage and in the process I’ve lost track of who I am. I just feel like everyone—including myself—looks at me and thinks I suck.”

“Okay,” I replied, “How about if we ask Jesus what he thinks of you? Pray something like this: ‘Jesus, right now I feel like I suck. But what do you say?’”

He closed his eyes, and after about 15 seconds he started laughing. “I see Jesus with his hands above his head, holding a big sign that says, Brian Doesn’t Suck!” And peace and life started to invade his situation. Jesus was speaking to Brian’s deep desire to belong, a desire that had been beaten down and unmet since childhood, and it was beginning to stick.



A few minutes later we came across another belief. Brian’s father had spent his life feeling obligated to stay in a job he hated to provide for his family. Watching his dad simply shoulder the misery and not even try to change, Brian (wanting to belong and to do what was expected) had taken on the same belief. “That’s just what men do,” he articulated.

“What?” I replied. “Be miserable?”

“We do what has to be done to provide. And we don’t expect it to be good—that’s just how it is.”

So I suggested another prayer. “Try asking Jesus, ‘I’ve believed that this is what men do: live a miserable life and lose themselves to be a provider. But what do you say my life should be like?’”

This time Brian got an answer before I had even finished the question. “I see Jesus dressed like Indiana Jones,” he blurted out, smiling. “He’s got the leather satchel and the fedora and everything. He’s all dressed in brown, and he’s saying, ‘Life is an adventure!’”

“So how does hearing Jesus say that life is an adventure impact you?”

“It’s exhilarating and scary at the same time.”

“That sounds good. And it sounds like Jesus.” We both laughed.

“What could you do to remember that revelation—to keep coming back to it so it grows inside you?”

“Well,” he said after a moment, “I’m going to find one of those cardboard cutouts of Indiana Jones, and paste Jesus’ face over it.”

We both laughed again. “What about that battered, brown fedora he wore?”

“Yeah,” he smiled. “I’ll get one of those, too.”

“And every time you wear it, you can remember Jesus saying, ‘Life is an adventure.’”

One of the things I pay attention to when Jesus speaks to people is his tone. Often the way he goes about talking to you is as significant as what he says. And it was striking how playful Jesus was being with Brian.

“If Jesus takes a certain tone when he is speaking to us about change, I figure it is a good idea to make our change process look like that. What tone do you feel he is taking with you here?”

“He’s sort of dopey, if I can use that word—funny, joking around with me, a little guy-sarcastic sometimes, making me laugh.”

“Okay—since Jesus seems to want this change process to be fun, let’s set it up that way. What do you like to do just for fun?”

“Fun?” he asked, looking up with a wry expression.

“Yeah. What are ten things you do just for the fun of it?”

“Well,” he replied slowly, “I like to fish. I used to do that with the kids, to spend time with them. But I haven’t gone fishing in years.”

“What else?”

“I like classic cars.”

“What do you like about them?”

“Working on them—you know, doing projects. I get a classic car magazine, but I haven’t read it for months. I just look at it and feel hopeless.”

It took a while to get ten entries. But then we stopped and invited Jesus into the process. “Take a minute,” I coaxed gently, “And ask, ‘Jesus, what do you want to do for fun with me?’”

He closed his eyes, then after a brief moment began choking up.

Ask Brian’s Question

Take one minute to ask this question and listen. Then jot down whatever hear, see, sense, or what comes into your heart:

“Jesus, what do you want to do for fun with me?”

“Jesus said that he’s been waiting for this conversation for years.”

What a beautiful way to touch Brian’s deep desire for belonging! Jesus wants to have fun with him! The very thing he couldn’t give himself, because he thought life wasn’t supposed to be that good, is his as soon as he asks.

And there’s more. Jesus doesn’t just whisper, “You are okay,” so that only Brian can hear. No, he has to hold up a big sign for *everyone* to see, that tells the whole world what he thinks of Brian. No dark places of wondering what others think remain for the lie to hide in.

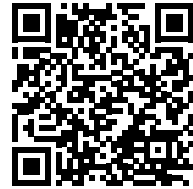
This story is a good example of what Jesus does with the deep desires that ultimately drive our behavior: he fills them within a relational encounter with him. On our

own, we run after things like being a good provider, having lots of friends, winning in business or getting results in ministry because we believe they will give us what we desire: belonging, love, significance or approval. However, the things in this world that we pursue to gain our true desire often turn around and bite us. Nothing in creation can satisfy our longing for the Creator but God himself.

We have a standing invitation from Jesus to fill our deep desires, and desire fulfilled is a tree of life that’s available right now, free for the asking. And when he fills us, the pressure to do something bizarre and twisted on our own to fill our deep longings fades away.

Brian’s story also shows how Jesus deals with the defenses we use to protect ourselves from unmet desire. These defenses are formed through painful experiences, not rational analysis. Since beliefs like “that’s what men do” are formed through experience, they must be changed through experience—not through a rational process. In other words, this is a job for *rhema* (the spoken, experiential word of God) and not *logos* (the written Word). So instead of having Brian use rational-brain tools like self-discipline or quoting Scripture to change

To watch a free video clip of Tony coaching a person through meeting Jesus in her deepest desire, scan this QR code with your smart phone or follow this link: www.metaf.us/23.htm



himself, we open the door for an experiential encounter. And Jesus shows up and speaks a *rhema* to the lie: “Brian Doesn’t Suck!” Experiencing the truth penetrates Brian’s defenses and touches the heart, and beliefs begin to change.

The Process of Heart Change

Jesus’ focus in this situation was not on what Brian needed to do differently as a father and husband, but on meeting him heart to heart. That’s the process Jesus models throughout the New Testament. Change is all about the heart. By contrast, the human way of change focuses on the surface, behavioral outcome. As Scripture puts it: “Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (I Sam. 16:7). The human way is to start on the outside, with a behavior we don’t like, and then try to rein it in with discipline and willpower. Our hope is that if we make ourselves change what we do outwardly, the change will work its way inward, so we eventually stop wanting to do the behavior we are fighting to suppress.

While we try to work from the outside in, Jesus starts with the inside, the heart’s desire, and then allows change to work its way from the inside out. Changed behavior is the *last* part of Jesus’ change process, the incontrovertible evidence that the heart change—the true change—has actually taken place.

A good example of this inside-to-outside principle is the story of the woman caught in adultery (see John 8:1-11). The Pharisees brought Jesus someone who had broken the rules (the human way of outward change focuses on the rules) and tried to force Jesus to deal with the problem the way they would, focusing on the outward behavior. The act of adultery, the outward sin, was the problem they saw and wanted to address.

Jesus refused to come at the problem that way. Instead of fixating on the outward issue, he focused inward, by facilitating an encounter where the woman *experienced* the heart of God touching her desire. She experienced an advocate taking her side even when she was in the wrong, and her desire to be pursued and valued was filled. She felt vulnerable and afraid, but then a protector stood up and kept her safe from harm. She felt shame from the world, but no shame from him, because he refused to condemn her. And her desires for approval and

belonging were filled. Where religion wanted to put her to death for longing for love, she met a God who filled her longing with himself instead. She was not punished for pursuing her desire in the wrong way: Jesus just set things right by filling the desire.

It is no wonder that when Jesus said, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” (John 8:10, RSV) that she answers by calling him “Lord.” In that moment, the experience of being loved unconditionally won her heart forever. She loved him back. And only

_____ then did he say, “go, and sin no more.” It
The relationship comes first; then the change. was only *after* her experiential encounter
 _____ with the heart of a good God, *after* the relationship filled her deepest desire for love, that her outward behavior was addressed. The desire-filling relationship comes first; then the outward change.

That’s not just a formula for salvation: that’s Jesus’ way of sanctification as well. His way assumes that changing behavior through discipline is *impossible* outside of encounters with the goodness of God filling the underlying desire. Change is fundamentally relational, because the power to change is not within you—it is within the desire-filling relationship.

Justin had always had a distant relationship with his father. As we talked about it one day in a coaching session, he began to discover that it originated in an experience he had as a boy. One night he made the winning catch in a Little League game (at an age where making a catch at all was something special), and his excitement grew as he drove to the Wednesday night service at church to tell his dad all about it. After patiently waiting for his dad to finish chatting with several of his parishioners, Justin finally got an opportunity. “Dad, guess what? I made the winning catch at the game! The last batter hit this fly ball, and...”

“That’s great, son. Good job!” Then he turned to begin talking to the next person waiting in line.

Justin’s excitement deflated like a popped balloon. As he wandered the church basement feeling sorry for himself, a teenager from the youth group somehow found out he had made the winning catch, hoisted him up on his shoulders and paraded him around the church,

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telling everyone that Justin was the hero.

Your belief is your interpretation of what happened—the meaning you put on it. In his disappointment, young Justin decided that “this teenager—I didn’t even know his name—gave me what I longed for when my own father wouldn’t. My dad doesn’t choose me.” Feeling that his father’s heart was closed toward him, Justin closed his heart to his father. Over the years they had a nice, civil relationship but no heart connection. The door to Justin’s heart was locked.



Thirty years later, Justin was surprised to discover how much he had arranged his life around that desire to be chosen. He was driven in his work, going far beyond what was expected, to ensure that he was chosen the next time around. Although he had a high value for family, he said “yes” to every opportunity at work and struggled constantly with work-family boundaries, because he feared if he said no that he wouldn’t be considered in the future. At conferences, he was a whirlwind of energy, getting involved in everything, because “you won’t get chosen sitting at home.” These behaviors were what he came to the coaching relationship to change, but they were only symptoms of the deeper longing in his heart.

The wall around Justin’s heart was 30 years’ high, and scaling it felt scary and unsafe, especially with his father. So we began by experiencing Jesus filling his desire in other areas of life. Justin began to pray, “Jesus, how have you been pursuing me today?” As Jesus touched his deep desire over and over, his driven behaviors began to fade. The anxiety about his future, his struggle to fully engage when he was with his kids, his need to be seen and recognized at work—all began to noticeably decrease, without much direct application of discipline to them. The door to his father also began to crack open—but it was still a scary place.

The crack in the wall kept opening wider, until finally it was big

enough to swallow a big chunk of truth. “Justin,” I postulated one day, “That teenager who carried you around on his shoulders after you won the ball game—what if that was Jesus? What if Jesus was saying, ‘I know your dad can’t give you what you need right now, so I am going to step in through this kid and make sure you get it anyway, just because I choose you?’”

There was silence on the other end of the phone, and then I heard Justin begin to cry. It took him about five minutes just to absorb the impact of that picture. The belief system he had lived in for thirty years, that we’d been patiently allowing Jesus to touch for months, suddenly crumbled and rebuilt itself with Jesus at the center in one beautiful moment.

I’ll let Justin share from his own journal about what happened inside him as Jesus filled up his desire to be chosen:

“I’ve had a kind of begrudging guilt: I know I should move toward [my dad] and initiate with him, but I don’t want to. It seemed like I was stuck in that place. Cognitively, I knew that I should move in that direction, but I didn’t want to and felt powerless to force myself to. It was like there was something in my way blocking all movement toward him—something I couldn’t articulate or put my finger on. I often said that it was like I had only numbness or nothingness when I would think about my relationship with my dad...”

“When I was a ten-year-old boy, I longed for my dad to want me, to think I was important, to pay attention to me, to pursue me, to spend time with me, to delight in me, to be proud of me, to be excited about me, to choose me over other things (even if I couldn’t have articulated it that way at the time). What I got in return was a lot of nothingness—busyness, absence, detachment. He didn’t give me what I wanted most. I was the victim of his negligence—the pain and struggle and many other things (e.g., timidity, self-protective maneuvering, etc.) were all results of this. Even though I am no longer a broken, hurting ten-year-old victim, I still see myself that way and view my father from that perspective.

“Consequently, when I think about him or about approaching him, I view him as the perpetrator of my hurts and lacks. How can I—the ten-year-old victim—approach him and love him and build a new relationship with him?

“The truth, however, is that by your grace, I am no longer the ten-year-old victim. You have brought awareness and healing and wholeness. You have broken me free from patterns and mindsets and bondage. I am a 37-year-old free man

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walking in joy in your presence... therefore I no longer need to view myself that way or view my dad as the perpetrator or view our relationship in those terms. It was absolutely amazing to me what a difference that made in me and in my perspective.

“At one point, Tony talked about how real healing and transformation will have come whenever I am able to give to dad what he never gave to me. When I am able to offer him that which I always wanted but never received from him; that will be evidence of nothing other than a work of your healing power...”

“What is it that I always wanted from him? I wanted him to choose me, pursue me, be interested in me, delight in me, pay attention to me, say no to other things in order to say yes to me. I didn’t receive those things from him, and it caused pain and hurt and many other things in me over the years. Now, however, you have given me all these things and more. You have satisfied my desires. You have given me what my dad never gave me. I am no longer a wounded victim; I am now a healed adult son. How does a healthy man who is filled by and delights in you relate to his father?”

“In the moment of that awareness, an amazing realization dawned in my soul. From the depths of my being, the cry rang out, ‘I’m free!’ A million thoughts raced through my mind all at once: ‘Wait a minute! I’m free! Why am I living like a slave or a victim? I don’t have to be like that anymore! I’m free to love and pursue and give.’ It’s like all you’ve been doing in my heart regarding my dad was a majestic song, swelling to that key moment when the music bursts forth in climax. That which was blank and empty and silent before now bursts forth in color and light and song. [The path toward my dad] was now an exciting prospect, wooing me to walk down it. I realized that I was free to do so—without baggage, without fear, without hindrance. Once again, you are standing at the head of this path with your hand outstretched to me. ‘Son, this is the path I am taking,’ you say. ‘Will you come with me?’

“Yes, Lord, yes! I will go with you anywhere—even down this path. The fact that I just wrote that—and meant it!—is evidence of nothing other than your transforming power at work in me...”

“Everything is different now. I view my parents differently. I pray for them differently. I desire a closer relationship with them. I want to connect with them and be more in their lives. I am looking forward to good time to spend with them when we are in the States next year. I want to move toward them and pursue them. I am thinking about them and their hearts—not just my own.

“Lord, this is a miracle—something only you could do. Thank you, thank

you for doing it! You are amazing and unfathomably powerful. Unbelievable. Wow. Thank you!!”

Encountering the Jesus who was in life-long pursuit of his heart gave Justin the power not just to open his heart toward his father, but to *want* to open it, to find joy in opening it. And even more, it gave Justin the power to supply what was lacking in their relationship. That’s the kind of change that Jesus loves to produce: where he has written his love upon our hearts, and we not only want to do the beautiful thing, but we have the ability to do it, because we are full. Then Jesus’ saying becomes fully true:

Come to me, all who labor and are 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. (Mt. 12:28-30, RSV)

Exercise: Beliefs about the Conversation

Praying your desire (see Chapter 7) is a different way to talk to God (if these prayers aren’t working for you, see “I’m Stuck!” on page 160). When you were invited to pray Margaret, Brian or Justin’s question, your beliefs about your conversation with Jesus may have risen to the surface—which gives you a great opportunity to evaluate those beliefs.

Look through the following belief statements, and mark the ones you identify with (or that you can modify to fit what you were thinking):

1. *You don’t talk to God that way.*
2. *God doesn’t like me.*
3. *It’s not about whether God likes me.*
4. *God isn’t someone you have fun with. He’s someone you obey.*
5. *Emotions are dangerous: don’t go there.*
6. *What I desire doesn’t matter. Christianity is about giving up what I want, not about getting.*
7. *Maybe other people could have this kind of relationship with God, but not me.*

8. *Jesus wouldn't really talk to me like he does to these people.*
9. *I don't hear anything when I ask God a question.*
10. *It is wrong to want to 'get something' from being a Christian.*

If you find a belief in the list that you identify with, give it a test. Here are several good questions for evaluating a belief:

1. *Based on what you know of the Bible, does this sound like Jesus? Would he say this?*
2. *Is this how a healthy family functions? Would a good father or mother relate to their kids this way? (Family is the primary analogy God uses to explain who he is.)*
3. *Do I see characters in Scripture doing or experiencing the thing that I think I shouldn't do?*
4. *Ask him about it. "Jesus, here's what I believe: _____. What do you say about that?"*

If you find a belief you no longer want to live by, skip ahead to Chapter 10: Changing Beliefs to learn how to deal with it.