

Experiencing Faith

1. Illumination & Renewal

We experience *illumination* when the Holy Spirit “enlightens our minds” so that we “understand spiritual truths” (read 1 Corinthians 2:9-16). A spiritual truth originates with the Word of God—whether it’s read or heard. It is possible to rationally or intellectually understand the meaning of God’s Word without experiencing illumination. Only when God’s Word impacts us at a soul-level do we experience the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. When these same truths impact us again and again it’s called *renewal* (read Romans 12:2; Titus 3:5). God’s Word is not only the instrument that brings us to faith, but God’s Word is also the primary instrument for growing our faith (see *Characteristics of Scripture*).

2. Transformation (progressive sanctification)

Transformation involves the gradual restructuring of our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. Once we have received the free gift of salvation, we begin to follow a new master (read Romans 6). Instead of following our own selfish ambitions we begin to follow Jesus. As we apply the Word of God to our lives, over time, we begin to notice changes in our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. The way we relate to people, God, and circumstances continues to evolve. We become more and more like Jesus Christ as our faith is tested and we persevere—i.e. as we continue to follow Jesus in the midst of our daily obstacles. The greatest sign of transformation is an increasing love and concern for other people.

Transformation is not a glamorous experience. Most often, it is a slow and painful process. We all pass through seasons of spiritual dryness and even waywardness. However, if those symptoms are constant and unchanging then we need to examine some fundamental issues: (1) Do we understand the gospel? And, (2) are we growing in obedience to the Word of God? See *Defining the Gospel* and *Personalizing Scripture* for more on those subjects. If the fundamental ingredients are present (knowledge and obedience) then transformation (i.e. spiritual growth) is happening—even if we don’t presently sense it happening. Growth is often realized in retrospect—i.e. as we look back over our experience.

3. Confirmation

We experience *confirmation* when the Holy Spirit affirms our spirit on a personal level. The apostle Paul explicitly refers to this experience on at least two occasions. Romans 8:16: “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (NIV). Romans 9:1: “I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit” (NIV). As we walk in obedience to God, there might be moments when the Holy Spirit *confirms* or *testifies* to the righteousness of our actions. Confirmation should not be confused with patting ourselves on the back for a deed well done.

Confirmation from the Holy Spirit transcends our own personal desires—and it often contradicts them. For example: We can make a sacrifice purely from a sense of obligation—we obey because we think we *need to* not because we actually *want to*. In those circumstances, the Holy Spirit may confirm our decision by giving us a sense of peace regarding our decision. Christian martyrs have expressed this sense of peace when deciding between Christ and freedom. They hated sitting in a prison cell and being cut off from their families, but the Holy Spirit *confirmed* their decision—and they experienced an inner sense of peace regarding the decision. Our experience may not be quite as dramatic, but the dynamic is the same—we make a hard decision and the Holy Spirit comforts and affirms us.

4. Praise (*transcendence*)

Praise occurs when our knowledge of God evokes a sense of worship. The word *transcendence* means “beyond the ordinary.” When we consider *who God is* and *what He’s done*— these considerations (which are beyond the ordinary) often inspire a deep sense of awe and wonder at the greatness or transcendence of God. That internal sense of praise can be expressed externally (e.g. verbal praise, music, dancing, etc.). Praise can be triggered in many different contexts. We might praise God as we observe the intricacies of nature, or as we contemplate the mind-bending reality His infinitude, or as we meditate on the depth and richness of His love for us—and the list continues.

Praise is not something that only Christians experience. For example: An atheist can look at the stars and be inspired to praise their beauty. But when a theist (someone who believes in God) is inspired by the stars, it’s a very different experience. For believers, there is an acute awareness of the intelligence behind the beauty. Theists associate the awe-inspiring handiwork of creation with an intelligent and powerful Being. An atheist finds virtue in the object itself, but a theist recognizes the beauty of nature echoes the majesty, power, and creativity of its Creator.

Now, Christianity is distinct from other theistic religions—we have the truth of the gospel. Christians recognize the following: God (the one true Creator of all things) sent His Son to earth as a man, to die for our sins, so that we could be united with God forever. A higher knowledge of God evokes a deeper sense of praise. As followers of Jesus Christ, we can experience praise at its deepest levels—because we know the truth of the gospel. The greater our knowledge of God, the more we appreciate *who He is* and *what He’s done*. If the transcendent majesty of God has never evoked a deep sense of awe and adoration within our soul, then something is missing from our faith.

5. Presence (*immanence*)

When the Spirit of God feels very near to us, then we are experiencing the *immanent presence of the Holy Spirit*. God is always present, but we don’t always sense His nearness to us. That’s what immanence means—nearness or closeness. There are various reasons that God seems closer to us at certain times than He does at others. Scripture indicates that suffering is often accompanied with a strong sense of God’s nearness (Psalm 23). Christian martyrs have confirmed that reality. Upon release from hostile situations, martyrs have often expressed similar sentiments: “We don’t miss the suffering but we do miss how *near* we felt to Jesus.” There’s no formula for God’s nearness—we can’t force it. It’s a gift from God designed to comfort and affirm His children.

Conclusion

There is certainly a danger in focusing on the Christian experience. But there is an equal danger in ignoring our experience (e.g. a lack of genuine conversion). Experiences are highly subjective (personal). We shouldn’t our desire for an experience dictate or direct our pursuit of God. God gave us His Word as an objective and clear standard. God’s Word clearly teaches us that the only requirement for salvation is belief (John 3:16). No amount of experience can ever secure our faith. Faith is a *free gift*, initiated by God, and completely separate from our own actions or experience.

The reason we cover these experiences is because faith will show itself. If we want assurance that God is living in us and working through us, then we should look no further than our own experience. Is the transforming power of God evident in our own lives? If not, then something is missing. Either our knowledge is false or our obedience is lacking. A lack of experience should motivate us to examine our faith more closely (see *Personalizing Scripture*).