



## How Faith Transforms Relationships: A Journey of Personal and Relational Change

By [Loren Marks](#), [Savannah Lowe](#), [David Dollahite](#)

### AMERICAN FAMILIES OF FAITH

August 18, 2025

*Can real people experience change? Couples of faith were shaped by gradual, sudden, and sacred transformation.*

One of the most fascinating and inspiring transformations in literature is found in Victor Hugo's beloved character Jean Valjean. Valjean was convicted for "stealing a mouthful of bread" to feed his sister and her children and was then sentenced to 19 years of hard labor in prison. After his release, he was treated as an outcast by most who saw him.

One, however, showed him mercy. Bishop Myriel welcomed Jean Valjean, fed him, and invited him to stay the night at his monastery. Jean Valjean was unaccustomed to any form of kindness, and prison had ingrained in him the tendency only to fend for himself.

He stole some silverware and ran away, only to be caught and dragged back to the scene of the crime. With divine grace, the bishop said the silverware was a gift, then refused to press charges and pointed out that Jean Valjean had forgotten to take the candlesticks. The bishop's act of redeeming kindness and forbearance saved Valjean from spending the remainder of his life back in the pit of a Parisian prison. Instead, the bishop secured Valjean's freedom and provided a fresh start, along with the assurance and sacred charge that Valjean's soul now belonged to God.

Through this experience with a godly guide, Jean Valjean transformed his character and thereafter used his strength, abilities, and life to help others. The skeptic can justly point out, however, that Hugo's *Les Misérables* is classical French fiction. Does "divine transformation" happen to real people in contemporary America?

The [American Families of Faith Project](#) includes 198 diverse couples who were identified by their respective clergy as "exemplary" and "strong" in their commitment to their faith and to each other. The balance of the present article compactly reflects a recent [social science study](#) that explored the personal and relational "transformations" reported by highly religious wives and husbands.

## Theme 1: The Quiet Miracle of Gradual Transformation

Among the families interviewed, 64% of couples mentioned relational transformations that happened gradually. Such changes often reportedly began with one individual family member, who eventually had a positive impact on others—or even on the whole family. For Darian, an African American Christian husband, the transformative influence came from his wife. He explained:

I've watched her impart ... values in the lives of our children over the years. ... [T]hat has so much encouraged me to want [to be] more of who God is. By watching her example and watching her pour into them day after day. Just in the small things that she would do during the holidays, things she would do ... when the children were very young, before they became of school age. ... The Bible became living and alive [to] me because of her.

While the positive examples of family members were frequently referenced, transformation also happened through relatively small practices that were repeated

across time—including engaging in worship services and personal prayer. Alvin, a Presbyterian father, reported that he was able to overcome family difficulties through the help of church attendance. He said:

Going to church on Sunday, when I first went, the good feelings, the positive energy that I felt at church, at first it lasted through Monday, and then I'd be back to my old nasty self. [But over time, the positive energy] slowly progressed, until finally the energy was flowing throughout the whole week so that it was a process of realizing how foolish I felt when I went to church and saw people being so utterly kind to each other and ... not focused on themselves. It really brought [me] out of my [self].

Although not as abruptly altered as Jean Valjean, both Darian (through his wife) and Alvin (through “people being so utterly kind to each other” at church) were significantly affected by the compassionate and moral actions of godly people.

Many others we interviewed similarly spoke of gradual change in their relationships with each other and with God over time. A Jewish couple, Esther and Reuben, said:

When we were first together, our views of God were very different. ... I think as we have bonded together [and] had a greater spiritual unity, the relationship with God has deepened. I don't know that I had as deep of a relationship with God before I got married [or] before we were really close, as I do now.

A gradual transformation reportedly came as Esther and Reuben “bonded together” and developed “greater spiritual unity.” They further reported that as their relationship deepened, so did their relationship with God.

Another example was offered by Yuan and Li-Mong, a Chinese American immigrant couple who converted to Christianity in mid-adulthood. They described a gradual transformation where their relationship had changed “more and more” because of their faith:

**Yuan:** Our temper did not grow with our age. Our edges and corners [were] ground out. Faith really [has had] great influence on our marriage.

**Li-Ming:** After quarreling, we had to face God; I would blame myself when I [would] think it was my fault.

**Yuan:** God really influenced our marriage. [We] thank God. I don't know how we would be in China if we had not come to the U.S.A. and [come to] believe in God. After we believed in God, our relationship [isn't] like the world's man and woman. God has [a] positive influence on our marriage ... more and more.

Another slow but meaningful change was reported by Mei, a Christian wife from Taiwan who converted to Christianity along with her husband Qin following 20 years of marriage and a move to the United States. Mei reflected:

We have a big difference in our individual character. He is irritable, I am tender; he is organized, I am not. Qin is always very busy, so sometimes he didn't know ... the situation of our family (or our) children's development; (or) his situation and mine. We had many conflicts before. ... I would (be) frightened by his loud voice. I always cried. He didn't listen to my explanations. Now (Qin) has changed his temper, and our conflicts are less and less. It was God who changed him. I couldn't change him for 20 years ...

In summary, about two-thirds of the couples we interviewed discussed personal and relational transformations that might well be called quiet miracles of gradual transformation. Even so, they were not the only transformations discussed.

## **Theme 2: “One Significant Moment”—The Miracle of Sudden Transformation**

Many participants, even without being asked to do so, identified *one significant moment* that catalyzed dramatic and significant change in their actions and relationships. For Jean Valjean, his one-time experience with the merciful and grace-filled bishop helped turn him down a path of service. He truly had felt that “[his] life [was] claim[ed] for God above,” and he shed his former criminal identity. A similar phenomenon of a sharp turning point was reflected in the words of one American Families of Faith participant who said, “*I determined at that point that I had to change.*”

Diana, a Christian mother, in a marriage now spanning decades, had a sudden change of heart through an abrupt internal shift near the beginning of her marriage. She recalled:

[Early on], I ended up in [a] marriage and basically it was a failure. I did not do things well and I did not do things right, and I can remember standing—standing at my kitchen sink one [time] when we'd been married for a couple of years, and I thought, "I'm so unhappy, but I can't leave," because divorce was never an option. So I said [to myself], "Either I'm going to change, or I'm going to be miserable for the rest of my life." So, *I determined at that point that I had to change*, and just become more godly, and not expect so much for myself, not be so selfish, and [not] expect everything to revolve around me.

Like Diana, others shared singular and sudden experiences that changed their marriage, priorities, and families. Kayla and Jamar, African American Baptists, shared that their transformation—unexpectedly stimulated by the destruction of their pride and joy—their dream car.

**Kayla:** I remember asking God, even from the beginning of the year, to bring my family and me close[r] ... and the [car] accident did that. ... [I]t's changed. We had a new deal, to do what God has called us to do. ... After that happened, it just made me realize that life was too short not to be doing [or] giving my best. So ... that was a [big] moment.

**Jamar:** It was just the car wreck ... the car was basically new. I think it made us look at material things in a different way ... and it made me realize what is important, and it's *not* "stuff." It's life and family and God that [are] important.

One particularly remarkable transformational spiritual experience was shared by Ty, an African-American, Nondenominational Christian husband. Shifting from his typical playful banter to a place of significant seriousness, Ty said:

I ... was chasing ... life ... away. I mean, misusing my family, treating the "world" like [it was] on top. ... [B]ut when I accepted God *that night*, my life and things began to change.

Ty then proceeded to tell his story of "that night."

I was at a strip club one night. [I was] high, [and] had been drinking, high as a kite, me and my buddy, and he was sitting just like me and you [are] ... [and] I heard a voice [call my name], and I said, "Man, stop playing." He said, "I ain't call[ed] you." I heard that voice three times. [Y]ou probably remember the story of Eli and Samuel [in the Bible]. When Samuel went to Eli [after hearing the voice], [Eli] said, "If you hear that voice a third time, [then] say, 'He[re] am I Lord.'" [Well], I heard that voice three times, and it was so soft.

Ty got up and left not only the strip club, but also broke ties with his drinking buddy. He went on to explain:

God had to change my life, my priorities, and get it lined up right. And once God lined my priorities up, then everything started working the way it was supposed to be in my marriage.

This was not only a significant turning point in Ty's personal spiritual journey, but the experience reportedly pushed him to prioritize his marriage and family. The transformation had both personal and relational consequences.

### Theme 3: The Combination of Gradual and Sudden Transformations

In addition to discussing (a) gradual transformations and (b) sudden, "one significant moment" transformations, many participants discussed experiences that demonstrated positive relational change through both elements of gradual and sudden transformation. Several accounts, for example, involved one spouse changing gradually and the other changing suddenly. Other accounts included a single (sudden) experience or recollection that also reportedly stimulated a gradual change in its wake. Malcolm, a Catholic father, identified a specific moment when his children inspired him to change, and then how he continued to change across time. He said:

When we were younger, my first two children, I wanted them to go to religion classes ... but I wasn't participating then. ... [Also], I would send [my kids] to mass with my wife and my mother, and my dad. And one day, one of my children asked me, "*Why should I go there if you don't go?*" And it was very real to me. That's what started my conversion, because I figured that if I was gonna share religion, then it would need to be a religion that I knew something

about. ... So, I started to feel the need, and the more I felt the need, the more it became real to me.

The beginning of Malcolm's conversion came because of a sudden wake-up call from his child, and it motivated him to commence on a long-term faith walk.

For Holly and Miguel, their individual paths took years to merge into shared transformation and unity in relationship with God. In Holly's case, the path of faith was slow and steady and had been her walk since childhood. She explained,

There's a hymn we sing at church that says, "As a deer longs for running streams, so I long for you." Faith is that longing and knowing that it's God [that you need]. Some people don't have that, but I've grown up with that and have the understanding as an adult that...I [need] God in some fashion, and that it's a natural, instinctive thing. As you grow and learn more about yourself, and your spirituality broadens and you understand certain things in relationship to God, you learn that you need to feed that faith.

Miguel was a Latino Catholic physician who had gone through a recent professional firestorm. His academic and professional life had been marked by expectations of deep fulfillment that never materialized. His recent trials, which occurred after achieving medical prominence, yielded this reflection regarding faith:

As you go through life and its steps, you seek fulfillment. We would say, "When we finish med school, it'll be great. When I finish residency, it'll be great. When I get my own practice, it'll be great." But you get to each step, and it's cool, but there's still that longing.... That's why we need our faith. That's why faith is important to us, because ten years ago we were trying to "make it" but (making it) is not what satisfies the longing.... [I have discovered that] faith is the only thing that satisfies that hunger and that longing that seems insatiable.

For Miguel, the inability to find true fulfillment in his ascension, followed by his abrupt halt on the medical ladder, gradually brought him to a new place of deeper faith and understanding.

Another couple, Lin (H) and Zhen (W), reportedly wrestled with God for nine years and finally “accepted God” after a harrowing experience. They **explained**, “We together first believed in God because of the adversity in May of 1995, [when] we lost our first child. We were baptized together for the same reason.” Notably, the tragic death of a child has led more than one religious person *away* from faith. However, in Lin and Zhen’s case, the result was the reverse. Lin told us, “The desperation of a man is the beginning of [knowing] God.” From the crucible of child loss, Lin and Zhen emerged as compassionate partners and (as reported by congregational “sisters and brothers”) they became sources of profound strength and service in their faith community.

As we consider the “sacred ground” experiences shared by some of America’s exemplary married couples, we are confronted with accounts of crashed cars, dark moments of failure, the call of God to leave a strip club and “get right,” jarring comments from children, and even the loss of a child to death. Even so, it was not these events themselves that produced personal and relational transformations. Rather, the catalyst seemed to be that during the trials of life, these women and men *discerned* a call from God and then *answered* that call to become more fully His.

One of the beloved songs sung by Jean Valjean in the Broadway version of *Les Misérables* reflects a time in his life when he is facing the man he once was. The lyrics indicate that Jean Valjean has gained divine confidence in himself, individually and relationally, as we hear his prayer:

*Still you hear me when I’m calling*

*Lord, you catch me when I’m falling*

*And you’ve told me who I am*

*I am yours.<sup>1</sup>*

The transformed Jean Valjean not only accepted but embraced the reality that he “belonged to God.” Women and men, wives and husbands, mothers and fathers in the *American Families of Faith* project allowed us onto their sacred ground by sharing many of the experiences through which they came to belong to God. Sometimes these positive transformations came by small and simple means that yielded great things in time.



In other cases, tragedy or transcendence erupted in “one significant moment,” while in other cases, life seemed to offer both types of transformation—the gradual and the sudden. What interests us most as family scholars, however, is that not only individuals but also family relationships were elevated. Perhaps most importantly, these transformations helped these families become sufficiently “exemplary” that their respective clergy told us, “These are the families you will want to study and learn from.” They were right.

We have learned that when we examine the most exemplary marriages in America, we find that most were *not* always that way. The individual and marital transformations these couples experienced—some gradual and some sudden, some beautiful and some bitter—helped forge marriages that not only survived the fire but were refined by it.

We also learn that if even the most enduring and successful marriages and families often had humble beginnings before transformation, then there is divine hope for the rest of us.

#### Note:

(1) Schönberg, Claude-Michel. (1980). “Who Am I?” [Song]. *Les Misérables* (1987 Original Broadway Cast Recording) [Album]. Decca U.S.

#### About the authors

##### Loren Marks

Loren D. Marks, Ph.D. is professor of Family Life at BYU, co-director of the [American Families of Faith](#) project, and co-author of [Religion and Families](#). He is a Fellow at the Wheatley Institute.

##### Savannah Lowe

Savannah Lowe is a student in the BYU School of Family Life.

##### David Dollahite

David C. Dollahite, Ph.D., is professor of Family Life at BYU, co-director of the [American Families of Faith](#) project, and co-author of [Strengths in Diverse Families of Faith](#).

