

# Change

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I don't watch a whole lot of TV, but one show that I do watch off and on with Lauren is "Once Upon a Time". One recent episode was centered around the theme of change. The main question of the episode was whether the wicked-queen character could change because of her love for her adopted son and become a good person instead.

It made for interesting watching, I thought, but it also reflects a huge blind spot that we humans have. Recent studies have shown that all of our lives change much more than we anticipate they will. The question is not whether we can change. It is how we will change. In my own case, my life is dramatically different from what I would have expected ten years ago. In March 2003, I was still in law school. I would never have imagined that I wouldn't work a day as a lawyer, that I would become a gospel preacher instead. I would not have predicted that I would marry Lauren, who, at the time, steadfastly refused even to go out with me. I would not have guessed that I would move to Illinois to preach, watch one of my children die, or have my mother die. And yet, all of these events, some of which happened to me, some of which I chose for myself, have left me a dramatically different person than I was in March 2003.

By March 2023, I will once again have become a dramatically different person, and so will everyone else in this room. We think we're safe just the way we are, or we think we're stuck just the way we are, but in reality, neither one is true. The way we handle that change will determine who we become. Let's look this morning at the subject of change.

## The Nature of Change

Before we delve further into this, let's explore the nature of change. First, as we saw in the introduction, change is **DRAMATIC**. This experiential truth is also confirmed by the Scripture. Look at one instance of this in Galatians 1:22-24. This text discusses the mid-career transformation of Saul of Tarsus. He went to Damascus to persecute the church; he came away from Damascus as one of the church's most noted defenders. Absolutely no one outside of God would have predicted this. In fact, one of the main narratives of Saul's early career as a Christian is the way he keeps meeting people who don't believe he has changed.

Very often, we have the same kind of struggles with change. First, we don't think it can happen. Back in the late 1990's, who would have imagined that downtrodden Apple would become a tech giant and mighty Microsoft would be a dog? Ten years from now, Apple will probably be back in the gutter and some other company will have risen up. Second, we have problems with acknowledging change when it occurs. We form our impression of a man when we first meet him, and we cling to that impression even when we see him behaving very differently. We prefer to believe that the world is a stable, unchanging place, even when our environment, our acquaintances, and we ourselves change all the time.

This change can be **FOR GOOD**. Consider the story of 2 Chronicles 33:10-12. Manasseh is the longest-reigning king that Judah ever has, and he is one of the most wicked. He is so diligent in leading his people to do evil that he does irreparable harm to his nation. God appeals to him repeatedly to repent; he pays no attention. However, in an incident that most likely occurs at the very end of his reign, Manasseh is captured by the Assyrians, is dragged to captivity in Babylon, repents, is restored to Jerusalem, and serves God for the rest of his days.

This is such a heartening story for all of us. It tells us that there is no one who is so wicked, so far from God, that he cannot change and become the person God wants him to be. It's entirely possible for a man to reject the gospel for decades, suddenly decide that he wants to obey it after all, and become faithful to the Lord for the rest of his life. It is entirely possible for us to struggle with some spiritual problem for decades, decide one day that we're sick of it and want to get rid of it, and from then on, live a life that is closer to God than we've ever been before. Both of these things happen all the time. None of us is stuck in some pre-ordained spiritual rut. Nobody we know is stuck either. Dramatic change for the good can come to any life, and that is both much easier and much more likely than we recognize.

The flip side of the coin is that change can be just as strongly **FOR EVIL**. We see a king of Judah who takes the opposite path from Manasseh in 2 Chronicles 24:17-18. Joash starts out as one of Judah's good kings. He has wise, godly advisors to whom he listens, he does all the right things, and generally is everything that God could want him to be. However, once his chief advisor, Jehoiada, dies, Joash changes drastically, and he changes for the worse. Instead of serving God, he begins to serve idols instead, and he ends his life sunk deeply in wickedness, a shame to his forefathers.

People change. The wicked can become good, and it is every bit as easy for the good to become wicked. It's a sad part of the Christian experience when our brethren fall away, and when it happens, it often leaves us scratching our heads. How can somebody who was just as faithful as he could be four years ago have no interest in serving the Lord today? Simple—he changed, and nobody noticed until it was too late. There are many lessons we could draw from this, but one of the most important is that we should never put our faith in men. God is faithful, but there is no guarantee that any human being will be. If we put our faith in brethren instead of God, we are sure to be disappointed.

Finally, though, change is **UP TO US**. We see this most aptly summarized in James 1:2-4. Sometimes, change is entirely the result of our decision. Sometimes, change is forced upon us. However, even in those circumstances, whether

that change brings us closer to God or pushes us away from Him is entirely our decision. Let me give you an example. Over the past several years, whenever I hear of someone who has lost a child, I make a habit of writing a letter to him, because it's something I've been through, and I hope the fruits of my experience can be helpful. Most recently, I wrote to Dan DeGarmo when his son died, and one of the things I told him was that losing a child would make him a very different man from the man he was before. That was going to happen. There was nothing he could do about it. What he could do, though, was determine what kind of different man he was going to be, proud, angry, and embittered, or humble, compassionate, and trusting. That's the way it is for all of us. The trials of our lives will inevitably change us, and the greater the trial, the more extreme the change. However, it always lies within our power to determine the kind of change we will undergo, whether it produces patience and spiritual maturity or faithlessness and disaster. We choose the change.

## Jesus and Change

In preparation for the Lord's Supper, we're going to consider the subject of Jesus and change. Our Lord's passion for change is plainly evident in the record of **HIS LIFE**. Consider what Jesus' own enemies said about Him in John 11:47-48. There are a lot of Biblical explanations for Jesus' death on the cross. He died to carry out God's plan, He died to fulfill prophecy, He died because He chose to, and so on. However, from the perspective of those who actually did the killing, Jesus had to die because He was changing things too much. If Jesus had been a lone ranter off in the wilderness condemning the religious authorities, they probably would have ignored Him. What made Jesus a danger to the chief priests was that He was changing hearts, persuading people to follow Him instead of them. They feared that He would lead His followers into rebellion, destroying both the nation and their power over it.

Ironically, the Jewish leaders' rejection of Jesus only led them to the end they feared. The Jewish nation was already headed for destruction before Jesus showed up. In the memorable words of John the Baptist, the axe was already laid at the root of the tree. The change that Jesus offered wasn't the path to destruction. It was the last opportunity they would have to rescue themselves from destruction. When the chief priests rejected Jesus, they doomed themselves, and in about 40 years, the temple, Jerusalem, and the Jewish nation would all be destroyed by the Romans they feared.

Even after His ascension, Jesus continued to change others through **HIS GOSPEL**. Once again, this is clear from the words of the opponents of the gospel, in Acts 17:6. This is precisely what Jesus intended for the gospel to accomplish—to turn the world upside down. As an inevitable consequence of that, it made enemies out of people who didn't want their world turned upside down. In this case, the foes of the gospel are Jews who really liked the status quo in which only they were God's special, chosen people, and when Paul preached that the Gentiles, too, could become part of God's holy nation, they reacted violently. Even today, there are all kinds of status quos that Jesus intends for His word to upset. He wants the gospel to call the unbelieving and the unchurched to Him, He wants to see it cast down all those who teach as doctrine the commandments of men, and perhaps most of all, He wants to see it transform His disciples, changing us constantly, dramatically, making us daily more like Him. The gospel certainly possesses the power to do all those things. When it isn't doing any of them, the only explanation is that we have disconnected ourselves from it.

Finally, of course, Jesus changes us through **HIS SACRIFICE**. Paul describes only a part of this change in Ephesians 2:12-13. I could spend an entire sermon making a list of all the things the Bible says about people who aren't Christians, and then making a list of all the things the Bible says about those who are. In this short passage alone, we see several things. Non-Christians are separated by their sins from Christ. They aren't part of God's people. They have no right to rely on God's promises. They don't have hope in the life to come, and they don't have God in this life.

For Christians, all of these things change. We are united with Christ in holiness. We belong to God's people and are part of His family. We are heirs of God's promises. We can anticipate eternal life with hope and expectation, and we can be comforted by the knowledge that God will be with us every step of the way there.

That's not just a change; that's a transformation of our lives in every way that truly matters, and a change of such epic dimensions can only be accomplished by a truly dynamic agent of change. Paul tells us what the agent is. It is the blood of Christ. The blood that Jesus shed on the cross took all of us who were so far from God and brought us near to Him. When I was in junior high, I was in a speech contest with the title, "I Can Make a Difference". All of us can make a difference on some level, but none of us can make a difference like Jesus. Through His death on the cross, He did nothing less than change the spiritual landscape of mankind forever.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's reflect on two things. First, let's remember how great a salvation we have in Jesus. His sacrifice means all kinds of wonderful things for us, but He paid an awful price to accomplish it. It's amazing and humbling to reflect that the Creator of the universe could love each one of us that much.

Second, let's ask whether the life-changing power of the Son of God is at work in our lives today. As Peter and all the apostles could attest, it wasn't a comfortable thing to follow Jesus when He was on the earth. Today, it shouldn't be a comfortable thing to follow Him either, and if we have reached a comfortable, complacent level as Christians, we aren't actually following. Jesus means to change us all. We need to consider ourselves to see if we're letting Him.

## How We Can Change

Having seen the importance of change for the Christian, now is the time for us to consider how we can change. Along these lines, the first thing we must do is to think about how NOT to change. We must **TAKE HEED** for ourselves. Paul tells us so in 1 Corinthians 10:12. Remember, friends, change is not necessarily either a good thing or a bad thing, but it is a certain thing. We are going to change, and the only thing we can determine is the direction. If we ignore this and attempt to coast along at our current spiritual level, our change will be for the worse.

No Christian is exempt from this. Every last one of us will sicken and die spiritually if we don't keep careful watch over our souls. In this congregation, one of the men for whom I have the greatest respect is John Meyer. I admire the way he has lived his whole life in good conscience before God. I aspire to serve one day as an elder, just as he has served. For all of John's achievements, however, he would be the first to tell you that all of his hard work in the past has not guaranteed him anything in the future. If John ceases to work, if he no longer devotes himself to prayer, if he doesn't make time to study the word, if he stops coming to singings and studies and even the assembly itself, it is not only possible for John to fall away. It is certain that he will.

No one is safe from that danger. In Acts 20, Paul prophesies to the Ephesian elders that some of them WILL forsake the Lord and lead other Christians into apostasy. Now, friends: if the most renowned Christians in the first century could lose their souls, if the same thing is possible for the most spiritually mature among us, what does that tell us about ourselves? If we stop pressing on and start slacking off, we will surely lose our souls too. Let's take heed instead.

On the other hand, if we want to change for good and not for ill, the first step in that process of change is **STUDY**. Let's learn this from a very familiar passage, 2 Timothy 3:16-17. We often cite this passage in the context of Biblical authority, and I believe that we do so rightly, but that wasn't really the original point that Paul was trying to make. Instead, he wants us to see that the more time we spend with the Scripture, the more the Scripture will change us. Whether we are trying to avoid what is wrong or do a better job at what is right, the Bible has the answers.

Indeed, God's word offers the best solution to the problem of spiritual malaise. There are plenty of Christians who have the God blahs. They don't get much out of the assembly, they don't do much for the Lord outside of the assembly, and discipleship has become a chore instead of a joy. First and foremost, that's a word problem. The Bible is fuel for our souls. If we try to make spiritual progress without filling up on the word, that's about like trying to drive a car with an empty gas tank. We can floor the accelerator all we want. We still aren't going anywhere. Conversely, the more time we spend with the Scripture, the farther we will go and the more we will grow. It will surely change us for the good.

Third, we must **BE TRANSFORMED** by the renewing of our minds. This comes, of course, from Romans 12:2. This text is important because it tells us how much God wants us to change. Like every man here who is about my age, when I was in elementary school, I had a collection of toys called Transformers. They would start out as cars or jets or whatever, and then, as I unfolded the limbs and popped out the head and so on, they would become robots. They ended up as something completely different. They transformed. What this Scripture tells us is that because of the renewing of our minds, we are supposed to end up as something completely different too. Spiritually, we are supposed to start out looking like us and end up looking like Jesus. That's our transformation.

A lot of brethren, I fear, haven't even realized that this should be their goal. They're a little bit different from what they started out as. They're a little bit different from people in the world. They're a little bit different, but they haven't transformed. They're like a car with a robot fist poking out one of the side doors, and it's the side that they don't show anybody. Brethren, that's not our call. We are called to change, and to keep on changing until we're like Jesus.

Now that we've got that down, let's leave the glittering generalities and move to specifics. Let's talk first about one specific way we can change to **EDIFY** one another. We see our responsibility to do this in 1 Thessalonians 5:11. Obviously, there are many ways we could carry out this command, but let's focus on one in particular. As you know, ever since we got our new hymnals, we've been having monthly hymn-learning sessions. Those have not been well attended, and I think that's my fault. I have been gearing them toward sightreaders, even though most in this congregation aren't. I appreciate those who can't read music but have been coming anyway, but I haven't been making it easy for them.

Starting on this month, all that is changing. Rather than attempting to learn all 300 hymns in the book we don't know, we're going to spend the rest of the year focusing over and over again on only 12 hymn tunes, tunes that happen to be paired with 31 different hymns. We aren't going to sing them once and then forget about them. Instead, we're going to return to them repeatedly in subsequent sessions, so that even people who don't read music will be able to learn them by heart. We're also going to make sure that these twelve tunes appear repeatedly in our assemblies. As a result of these things, by the end of the year, these twelve tunes should be a familiar part of our repertoire that we can use. The process begins Sunday, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 5:00 P.M., at Joe and Nancy's house. It'll be a change for the better.

Let's also look at one specific thing that most of us, at least, can change to help us **EVANGELIZE**. There are several passages of Scripture that emphasize the responsibility of every Christian to reach out to the lost, among them Acts 8:4. Ordinary Christians in the first century taught the word to others, but we struggle with that today.

Obviously, we need to change that, but the good news is that we can change it. Throughout this year, there are going to be several little micro-efforts to reach out to the community. This is the first—an evangelistically oriented e-card. Tomorrow morning, I'm going to be posting it on Facebook, both on my personal page and on the Joliet group page. If you want to change to be more like the Christians in Acts 8, hit "Share". If you want more people to see it, like it when other people share it. If you aren't on Facebook, but you have an e-mail address and want to send it to your 300 closest friends, let me know, and I'll send it to you. If you have nothing to do with the Internet, don't worry. There will be other things in coming months that you will be able to do. Clearly, there is more that all of us can do, but if we aren't doing anything, sending around an e-card is at least a start. It's a small change that will help us on to larger ones.