

Dealing with Change

Psalm 22:22–31, Acts 11:1–11

Change is not always pleasant. Humans are creatures of habit. We are open to new challenges, but we like to approach them from a framework of stability—stable home life, stable relationships, a peaceful, stable society, etc. When too much changes all at once, it leaves us feeling insecure, unsure of the future. For those of us who know Christ, it is a great comfort to us to know that “I am the LORD, I change not.”¹ The fact that *God* does not change—his character does not change, his promises do not change, his requirements do not change—gives the Christian a framework of stability in an ever-changing world.

Think of the early Christians in Jerusalem. Most of them had been raised in Judaism, with its rhythm of temple worship, the law, the priesthood, animal sacrifices, a shared worldview, etc. Christ “came unto his own, and his own received him not.”² Judaism as a whole rejected the promised Messiah when he came, but there was a faithful remnant, taught by the Spirit of God, who received him. But the early church in Jerusalem was essentially Jewish. Though believers in Jesus Christ would meet in homes to hear the word of God and worship, they would present their children at the temple for the rite of circumcision, they would observe the Passover, as many generations of their spiritual forebears had done. Christianity was essentially Jewish. So when news filtered back from Caesarea that uncircumcised Romans had received the Holy Spirit and were received into the church, the Jerusalem Christians were alarmed. Big changes were happening, and they didn’t know how to deal with them. Though this had been clearly prophesied in the Jewish Scriptures, as in our Old Testament text this morning: “All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations—the *goyim*, the Gentiles!—shall worship before You,” the early Jerusalem Christians still didn’t know how to process this. The fact that there would be people in the church who did not have the same shared worldview, who didn’t have the same life experiences, was perceived as a threat.

So our New Testament text begins, “Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, ‘You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!’” Here are two different groups of people: “the Gentiles” and “the circumcision.” “Gentiles” is the translation of the Greek word *ethnē*, which in the Septuagint corresponds to the Hebrew *goyim*, Gentiles. This word had taken on the meaning *foreigners*, connoting religious and moral inferiority. So now the *ethnē*—people perceived as being religiously and

¹ Mal. 3:6

² John 1:11

morally inferior—were being received into the church of Jesus Christ. What was a self-respecting Jewish Christian to think? Rather than rejoice that the kingdom of Christ was expanding and encompassing Gentiles, rather than rejoice that prophecy was being fulfilled, that the ends of the earth were turning to the Lord and the Gentiles were worshipping the true God, the Jerusalem Christians were suspicious, fearing they might lose their grip on the church. They were offended that Peter had gone to eat and drink with Gentiles, treating them as equal sharers in the grace of Christ.

The Jerusalem Christians were in need of an attitude adjustment. As Peter later wrote in his first epistle, “Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5). Yes, God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble. All of us should approach God with an attitude of humility—humility before God and man. We should all ask ourselves, “Do I have an attitude of superiority? Do I use racial slurs or ethnic put-downs? Does my behavior tend to alienate people from the church of Jesus Christ?” How easy it is to adopt an attitude of superiority which communicates that I am a member of the church of Christ because of my own deserving, when our theology teaches us that as fallen sinners we were all equally *undeserving* of the grace of Christ. *All* of us came to Christ as unworthy sinners, fallen in Adam and having come short of the glory of God. Not one of us deserves salvation, not one of us deserves to be part of the elect people. We are part of the church of Jesus Christ because God had mercy upon us. “When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the *ungodly*” (Rom. 5:6). It is simply not the case that we are heirs of the grace of Christ because of our deserving.

Yet so often Christians exude an attitude of superiority. When we speak disparagingly of other people because of their race or family background, we communicate something that is antithetical to the gospel. It had been God’s plan all along to bring the Gentiles to saving faith. As he spoke through Isaiah the prophet, “In that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, who shall stand as a banner to the people; for the *Gentiles* shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious” (Isa. 11:10). “Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, my Elect One in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; he will bring forth justice to the *Gentiles*. He will not cry out, nor raise His voice, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench; he will bring forth justice for truth. He will not fail nor be discouraged, till He has established justice in the earth; and the *coastlands* shall wait for His law” (Isa. 42:1–4). “And the *Gentiles* shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising” (Isa. 60:3).

We live in a time of racial polarization. People’s racial sensitivities are on high alert. And when Christians by their actions or even glances communicate an

attitude of racial superiority, it can destroy the outreach of the gospel. As one author put it, “Deeply embedded prejudice can lurk within even a redeemed heart.”

Mahatma Gandhi shares in his autobiography that in his student days in England he was deeply touched by reading the Gospels and seriously considered becoming a convert to Christianity, which seemed to offer a real solution to the caste system that divided the people of India. One Sunday he attended church services and decided to ask the minister for enlightenment on salvation and other doctrines. But when Gandhi entered the sanctuary, the ushers refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go elsewhere to worship with his own people. He left and never came back. “If Christians have caste differences also,” he said to himself, “I might as well remain a Hindu!”³

How tragic that the future leader of India, who had a genuine interest in learning about the Christian faith, should have been rebuffed as he came into a church to hear the gospel! How tragic that the church ushers were more interested in keeping their church racially unmixed than in reaching a lost soul with the glorious message of Christ! Is it possible that our words and actions subtly communicate the message “strangers not welcome”? What if someone had said that to us? Is it possible we never would have come to Christ?

Do we truly desire that Christ would be universally acknowledged Lord of the nations? Do we long to see his church full with men and women from every kingdom, tribe, tongue and nation singing his praises? Isn't the glory of the gospel that its saving benefit extends to all men without distinction? What if we were all to pray regularly for opportunities to welcome outsiders into our home, our life and Christ's kingdom? Only eternity would reveal the impact. When the disciple Andrew met Christ, Scripture tells us that “He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messias, which is, being interpreted, the Christ.” What an impact he had on the future course of civilization, as his brother Simon was the one who brought the gospel to the Gentiles! What if each of us endeavored to be an Andrew, showing by our words and actions a desire for our friends and neighbors to know Christ? But how easily such a desire could be derailed by deeply embedded prejudice! How was Peter going to win over the Jerusalem Christians who were prejudiced against the idea of bringing uncircumcised Gentiles into the church?

The answer is that he carefully explained the steps by which the Lord had sovereignly brought about his mission to the Gentiles. What we have in verses 4–17 is Peter's careful rehearsal of the sovereign God's working to bring him to the house of Cornelius and bring God's grace to the Gentiles. He explained that he was in the city of Joppa praying. What is prayer? The soul's communion with God, “an

³ Hughes, *Acts*, 149, cited in *Christ-centered Exegetical Commentary*

offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.”⁴ Peter was at prayer. He tells this to the Jerusalem Christians so that they would be assured that he had done nothing to orchestrate his mission to Caesarea. The desire to undertake this mission was entirely the work of God; it was God who put this plan together.

What about you? Do you make time to pray? The Psalmist confessed, “My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God” (Ps. 42:2). If we truly long for God, then we will seek his face in prayer. If not, then we will find all sorts of excuses for not praying. We will convince ourselves that we are too busy to pray. The definition of a Christian is a person who prays. In Acts 9:11, when the Lord wanted to reassure Ananias that the murderous Saul was a changed man, he told him to “inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he *prayeth*.” People from all religions claim to pray, but the Bible clearly teaches that there is only one way for sinful man to approach a holy God, and that is through the mediation of Christ. “There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). Sinful man cannot approach a holy God without a mediator—someone who is qualified to reconcile antagonistic parties. Christ, the sinless Lamb of God, because he took God’s righteous wrath against sinners upon himself, is the alone mediator between God and man. It is only through Christ that our prayers are heard. If we attempt to approach a holy God apart from Christ, our prayers are to no avail.

Peter was at prayer on the rooftop of Simon the tanner. Think of it—a man considered “perpetually unclean by the Jews because he dealt with dead animals in order to convert their skins into leather.”⁵ It was on the rooftop of Simon the tanner where Peter was praying that God appeared to him in a trance and he saw as it were a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners, coming to him, and on this sheet Peter saw all manner of unclean animals—four-footed creatures, wild beasts, creeping things, fowl—and a voice saying, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” But of course Peter’s response was, “Not so, Lord!” Peter was an observant Jew. Nothing common or unclean had ever gone into his mouth. But the voice answered him from heaven, “What God has cleansed you must not call common.” This was a most significant statement. God had, as it were, cleansed the Gentiles. The middle wall of partition had been broken down. It was now his purpose to bring the Gentiles into the church. Peter emphasized that “this was done three times,” indicating that it had been done deliberately, unmistakably. And at that very

⁴ Westminster Shorter Catechism 98

⁵ *Christ-centered Exegetical Commentary*, Olive Tree Bible Software

moment, three men stood at Simon the tanner's gate, having been divinely sent from Caesarea.

But what happened that day represented a sea-change in the plan of God. The time had arrived for the calling of the Gentiles into the church of Jesus Christ. And as I stated at the beginning, change is uncomfortable. So it is with us today: neighborhoods change, culture changes, churches change, people change. When we go to a doctor we are asked, "Any changes since your last visit?" We live in a changing world, but the Christian has confidence in an unchanging God. "I am the LORD, I change not." In the words of the hymnwriter, "Change and decay in all around I see; O thou who changest not, abide with me."

Now if we're part of a faithful church, and new members come in, the church changes, but its message does not change. But on the other hand, if the church's *message* changes, then that's not a good thing. If a church stops preaching Christ, then that is a change that is unacceptable to the Christian. If that cannot be remedied, then the faithful believer's only recourse is to withdraw and seek out a faithful church where Christ is exalted and his gospel is preached. This is the message that every man, woman and child so desperately needs to hear. Change just might be tribulation. Christian, your Savior has told us, "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). God "giveth more grace."⁶ Even though change is uncomfortable, even though it is not something we would have chosen, even though it may be positively painful at times, God will give us the grace to bear it. It might prove to be just the thing that we needed at a particular moment to help us grow in the faith.

The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 9, asks, "What do you believe when you say: I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth?" The answer: "That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who of nothing made heaven and earth with all that is in them, who likewise upholds and governs the same by his eternal counsel and providence, is for the sake of Christ his Son *my* God and *my* Father; in whom I so trust as to have no doubt that he will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul; and further, that whatever evil he sends upon me in this vale of tears, *he will turn to my good*; for he is able to do it, being almighty God, and willing also, being a faithful Father."

"*All things—even the painful changes of this earthly life—all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose*" (Rom. 8:28).

Many of us are profoundly disturbed that our political process is being run right now by people who seem to hate America, who want to transform America into a gigantic welfare state where liberty is a thing of the past, where all decisions are

⁶ James 4:6

made in Washington, where meaningful debate is crushed, where taxes are high, where elections are stolen, where our borders are not protected. Those who value liberty and tradition are rightly disturbed by what we are seeing.

But, dear friends, God is still on the throne! In him our safety is secure. We, his people, need to cry out to him at a time like this. He is a merciful God. He alone is our protection. He has not promised us that skies will always be rosy, but he has promised that “the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.”⁷

A dear friend of our congregation writes that “a recent PET scan shows cancer has increased. Am having a couple of tests to see what other treatment I might do. If I choose not to do any more, then we start talking to hospice before too long. Not precisely sure how many months of life remaining that would translate into, but Glory Land appears to be more near. The Lord Jesus is all the more precious.” Here is a young man dealing with what most of us would call unwelcome change. Yet in the providence of God it has made his faith stronger, his yearning to be in the presence of Christ all the sweeter. God is being glorified in the life of our brother.

Let us all look to our Lord in faith, and let us seek his face, for salvation alone comes from him. With divine help, we can deal with change. Amen.

⁷ Rev. 11:15