

INTRODUCTION

This morning I’m beginning a new four-week series on change. Do you need a change of YOU? If you think I said, “change of view” meaning a new location, that’s by design. The problem is that when people are unhappy, they want to a change of view—they want their circumstances to change. But what is most needed is a personal change—a change of you. To put it another way, most people are looking for a change of scenery, when what they really need is a change of self.

2008 is going to be full of changes for all of us. We’ll be voting in November to change the occupant of the White House. By the way, if you’re 20 or younger, the only occupants of the White House have either had the last name of Clinton or Bush—and some are claiming this trend might continue. If Hillary is elected and re-elected, as incumbents seem to be, that would mean that for almost three decades the White House has been occupied by members of only two families—that sounds more like the dynasty of a monarchy more than a democracy!

In 2008, we’re going to face lots of changes—including changing Presidents. Change is nothing new. From the beginning of human history there have been changes that have impacted the world—all the way from the invention of the wheel, to the printing press, to the internal combustion engine, to when Al Gore invented the Internet. There has always been change, but what we must understand is the rate of change is accelerating rapidly. The whole thesis of this series is to encourage you to stop fearing change and to start embracing good changes.

To stimulate your thinking about change, here are some good quotes about change: “Change is inevitable—except from a vending machine.” President Woodrow Wilson said: “If you want to make enemies, try to change something.” Jimmy Dean did more than sing about Big Bad John and make sausage; he’s a homespun philosopher as well. He said: “I can’t change the direction of the wind, but I can adjust my sails to always reach my destination.” An unknown author wrote: “If you’re in a bad situation, don’t worry, it will change. If you’re in a good situation, don’t worry, it will change.” Benjamin Franklin left us two gems about change: “Life is change. Growth is optional. Choose wisely.” and “When you’re finished changing, you’re finished.”

As we think about change, I want to use the Old Testament character Naomi as a case study. Her story is found in the delightful little book of Ruth. If you’ve never discovered the story of Ruth, then, sadly, you’re just Ruthless.

Here’s the background. Naomi was originally from Israel, but during a famine, her husband moved Naomi and their two sons to Moab. While there, the boys married two local gals, Orpah and Ruth. By the way, if Orpah’s name sounds similar to a popular talk show host it’s because Oprah’s parents intended her to be named Orpah, after this character in the Bible, but her name was misspelled on her birth certificate—that’s how Orpah became Oprah! Meanwhile back in Moab, Naomi has to plan three funerals because her husbands and her two sons die, leaving Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth as widows. Naomi decided to move back to Israel. She told both her daughters-in-law to stay in their home country. Orpah decided to stay. It was a sad time. Let’s pick up the story in Ruth 1:14-21:

“At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-by, but Ruth clung to her. ‘Look,’ said Naomi, ‘your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.’ [These next words are often spoken at a wedding ceremony, but they were originally to Naomi by her daughter-in-law.] But Ruth replied, ‘Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.’ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, ‘Can this be Naomi?’ [Now listen to the pain in Naomi’s heart: The name Naomi means, “pleasure.”] ‘Don’t call me Naomi,’ she told them. ‘Call me Mara [which means “bitter” in Hebrew], because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.’”

We’ll come back to how this story ends later, but now I want to see the pain Naomi experienced because of the major life-changes she endured. I want to teach you three important principles about change. Then I want to learn one *very* important principle about God.

1. CHANGE IS HARD: IT REMINDS US WE AREN’T IN CONTROL

Naomi had these life changes forced upon her. She was forced to move twice, and then her marital status changed when she became a widow. When her husband and sons died, she lost the right to their property, so her financial condition changed for the worse.

Some of you have faced those very same changes over the past few years, and you may be facing more changes right now. Small changes that we have control over us don’t bother us. You can change your hairstyle, or change your furniture around, or change the paint color in your house. Those are easy changes because those are changes you choose. But change is hard when we face changes not of our choosing.

Men have a reputation for being control freaks, and it IS true we like to hold the remote control. I invited some of my friends over to watch a football game this fall, and I gave each of them a remote to hold—only mine worked, but they felt better just holding one! Men don’t want to see what’s on TV, we want to see what *else* is on TV. But whether you’re male or female, old or young, you want to maintain a measure of control over your life. Most major life-changes that happened aren’t of our choosing. It reminds us we aren’t in control as much as we’d like to be.

2. CHANGE HURTS: IT MOVES US OUT OF OUR COMFORT ZONE

Naomi said, “I might as well change my name from pleasure to bitterness because my life is a full of pain!” Everyone’s first reaction to change is resistance. Someone said, “Nobody likes change except a baby with a wet diaper, and even HE cries!” Change is painful because it moves us out of our comfort zone. We are all pattern-making creatures. We create patterns then we become more comfortable in those patterns than with change. Soon those patterns can become

ruts and we get stuck in the ruts. Sometimes a rut is nothing but a grave with both ends kicked out!

One of my favorite characters from the Peanuts cartoon strip is Linus. Linus loves his special blanket and he’s not going to surrender it. Lucy tries to make his life miserable and take his blanket away, but Linus refuses to give it up. It’s his security, his comfort zone. Most of us are the same way. We have our own personal “blankets” and we don’t want anyone taking them away, thank you very much.

For example, most people tend to sit the same place in church every Sunday—it’s not just true here, it’s the same in every church. If you show up to your “spot” on Sunday and somebody else is sitting there, chances are you’re going to frown, or grumble a little. Hopefully, you won’t say, “Hey, that’s my seat!” Change is hard, and it hurts, but that’s okay because:

3. CHANGE IS HEALTHY: IT CAN LEAD TO NEW AND BETTER CIRCUMSTANCES

Did you notice the title of this message? “Change: No Pain; No Gain.” That phrase is used by fitness trainers while they’re torturing someone who’s actually paying them money to suffer! I had a trainer tell me once when you’re lifting weights, if you don’t feel the burn, you’re not building muscle tissue. The same is true about change—it hurts, but if you handle change correctly, it can lead to gain.

George Bernard Shaw has written: “Progress is not possible without change and those who cannot change their minds will never change anything.” Mark Twain said it this way: “Loyalty to a petrified opinion never broke a chain or freed a human soul.”

When we are going through major life changes, we can only think about the pain, but if you really trust God, you can look ahead to the gain. Have you ever noticed that every great character in the Bible who was greatly blessed also had great challenges? I’ve discovered a repeating pattern in the Bible that I’ll call: “God’s Blessing Equation.” It’s a formula God uses to deliver His blessings. There are three stages in the equation. First there is always God’s Promise. Every blessing we receive from God begins with a promise. But we want the promise delivered immediately, but in the Bible, there is always a second stage: Problems. Now, we want to skip this part of the equation and move onto the third stage: God’s Provision. But when you look at that equation, what’s right in the center of the formula? Problems. We resist change that creates pain because we want to try to avoid pain and problems at any cost. But God knows we’re not ready to receive His Provision, so He graciously allows us to go through seasons of suffering—problems—to prepare us to receive His Provision.

Do you remember Joseph and his coat of many colors? Joseph is one of dozens of examples I could use to illustrate this equation. As a teenager, Joseph had a dream of all his older brothers bowing down before him. That was God’s Promise. But Joseph was a long way from being ready to receive the fulfilment of promise. Then came the problems—beaten up by his brothers and then sold into slavery in Egypt. Then he was falsely accused and served time in jail—those are some pretty painful life-changes! But Joseph never stopped trusting God, and eventually, God delivered on His promise. The time came when Joseph was Prime Minister of Egypt and his

brothers DID bow down before Him. Note it: God’s Promise; Problems; God’s Provision. Where are you in that equation? If you’re going through a painful time, rejoice because God may be just getting you ready to be blessed!

4. IN CHANGING TIMES, GOD IS OUR STEADY REFUGE

The Bible says, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” “I the Lord do not change.” (Psalm 46:1; Malachi 3:6) There is a theological doctrine called the immutability of God—that’s a big word for saying that God never changes. It’s not that He *can’t* change, of course, He could change if He wanted to, but He just doesn’t need to. God is perfect, so why would He need to improve on that? By contrast, we must keep on changing and adapting because we are imperfect people living in an imperfect world.

I grew up near the Gulf of Mexico, so I’ve always enjoyed swimming and body surfing the waves. In the gulf, if you have waves three feet high, that’s a big surf. I’ll never forget the first time I visited Hawaii. I decided to body surf the waves at Kaanapali Beach. I body surfed those waves that were about six to eight feet high, and I discovered WHY those surfer dudes were riding boards on top of the waves instead of body surfing in the waves! I got submerged and tossed around like a rag doll in a washing machine. There were times I was underwater and I was so disoriented, I really didn’t know which was up and which way was down! Change is the same way—if we don’t handle change correctly, we will become dizzy and disoriented. As we face the building change waves of the future, there three truths about God you can hang onto that will *never* change. If you are struggling with the pain of major life changes right now. Here are three truths you should remember:

(1) When you’re disoriented by change, confess: “God’s love for me will never change!”

God says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” (Jeremiah 31:3) You may not feel very lovable sometimes, but that’s okay because God loves you anyway. We all have good days and bad days, but the truth is God loves you on your good days when you do the right thing; and God loves you just as much on your bad days when you do the wrong thing. You can’t earn His love—He loves you warts and all. God knows every stupid thing you’ve ever done, and He still loves you as if you’d never goofed up. God knows every stupid thing you’re *going* to do, yet He still loves you as if you were sinless and perfect. God’s love for you isn’t based on your performance, it’s based on God’s character. God’s love for you is written in His Divine DNA, and He never changes.

Some of you have been burned by love. Somebody told you they would love you forever, and they lied. They changed their mind, and stopped loving you. But the Bible says in 1 Samuel 15:29, “God is not a man, that he should change His mind.”

I don’t never like to use double negatives, but let me put it this way: God can’t not love you! Why don’t you say that out loud? God can’t not love me! Now, say it to your neighbor: God can’t not love you!

2008 is going to full of changes for you. There will probably be family changes, financial changes, national changes, and world changes, but there is something solid and steady you can hang onto—God loves you and He won’t stop loving you.

(2) When you’re disoriented by change, confess: “God’s Word never changes!”

“The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the Word of our God stands forever.” (Isaiah 40:8) God’s Word doesn’t go dormant like grass, it doesn’t wilt like flowers, it is always fresh, it doesn’t get stale, and it never goes out of date. I think we have a great newspaper for a city our size, so I read the Tyler paper every morning. But after I read it, I put it in the recycle bin and forget about it—tomorrow it’s not “news,” it’s “olds.” I read the Word of God every day, and as I read it, I get the sense that it makes more sense today than it did yesterday. It is more relevant for our world today than it was 10 years ago or 100 years ago. It’s “news” that just keeps getting “newer.”

In Matthew 7:26 Jesus talked about the difference between a fool and a wise person. He said the fool is somebody who ignores God’s Word. Jesus said that fool is like a person who built his house on sand, and when the hurricane came, the house blew away. By contrast, a wise man is someone who hears the Word of Jesus and obeys it. Jesus said a wise person is like the man who dug down deeply and built his house on a solid foundation of rock. When the hurricane came, his house stood stable. When the hurricane force winds of change swirl around you, if your life is built upon the Word of God you will find stability and strength to endure.

I challenge you to read the entire Bible in 2008. Don’t make it a resolution, make it a *revolution*! It’s not easy, because the best way to read the Bible is NOT to start in Genesis and read all the way through. The Bible is 66 different books, and there are more practical ways to read through it from cover to cover. We have some great resources in our bookstore to help you read through the Bible. Or if you want to start on your own, begin with the book of John, then alternate between a New Testament book and an Old Testament one. I promise that your life will be revolutionized if you will read all 66 books of God’s Word in 2008.

(3) When you’re disoriented by change, confess: “God’s Plan for me hasn’t changed!”

The Bible says, “The plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.” (Psalm 33:11) I’ve always loved the first of the Four Spiritual Laws: “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” Before you were born, God had a plan for your life—and the Bible says in Jeremiah 29:11 that His plan for you is to not to harm you, but to prosper you—to give you a hope and a future.

Now our plans often change—we HAVE to change our plans sometimes. We change our plans for a couple of reasons. First, we can’t see the future; we don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow, much less ten years from now. But God doesn’t have that limitation, He knows the future and He’s never surprised. One expression NEVER been uttered by God is, “uh oh.”

Another reason we have to change our plans sometimes is because we just don’t have the resources and power to execute our plans. You might make a plan to make a million dollars

before Tuesday, but chances are you’ll have a hard time pulling that one off. But God is able to carry out His plans. The Bible asks, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” The answer is, “duh.”

Through the years, I’ve had a lot of people talk to me about God’s plan and purpose for their lives. These discussions usually revolve around two questions. (1) “Can I miss God’s plan for my life?” Absolutely. Unfortunately millions of people miss God’s plan for their lives through sin, disobedience, neglect, ignorance, or arrogance. Their philosophy is, “At the end of my life I want to say, ‘I did it MY way.’” God will never force His plan on your life. He has given you the free will to choose whether or not to follow Him. He didn’t create us as fancy robots preprogrammed to fall on our knees and automatically say, “I will follow your plan, O God.”

(2) “Can I get back on track after wasting years of my life?” Absolutely! You might have taken a lot of detours and found yourself at a lot of dead ends, but God’s plan for your life hasn’t changed. Whenever you’re ready, God can loving and patiently bring you back to square one and say, “Ready, set, go!” You may be thinking, “But you don’t know about that stupid choice I made ten years ago. You don’t know about that moral blowout I had three years ago. You don’t know that I stopped praying a few years ago.” You’re right, I don’t know, but guess Who does? And I do know this: regardless of what you have done in your past, God has not given up on you. You can STILL get back on track for His plan for your life. If you don’t believe it why are you right here listening to me tell you this at this moment?

One of the hottest Christmas gifts this year was a GPS navigation system for automobiles. If you program in an address, the navigation system will calculate the quickest, shortest way to your destination. But if you miss a turn, the system doesn’t say, “Too bad, you dummy. You should have listened to me, but now you’re hopelessly lost.” Instead if you get off track the system says, “Recalculating route” and soon it has you back on the right track.

God’s plan for your life is the same way. Maybe you’ve made some wrong turns and arrived at some dead ends. God loves you and He is willing to recalculate your route to put you on the right track for abundant life. Don’t give up on God, because He hasn’t given up on you!

CONCLUSION

Now, let’s go back and close the loop in Naomi’s life. Do you recall the pain and anguish she expressed because of all the changes she faced? Those painful changes led her and Ruth to move back to Bethlehem. God had a plan all along even though Naomi couldn’t see it in the midst of her painful changes. Eventually Ruth met a man named Boaz, who was a distant relative of Naomi’s late husband. He qualified to be a kinsman-redeemer who could restore to Naomi all the land her husband’s family had once owned. It’s a great love story and I hope to share the details of it with you in a future message, but for now let’s fast forward to the end, and see the final result of changes in Naomi’s life. The Bible says, “So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. And the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: ‘Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer ... He will renew your life and sustain you in old age.’ ... Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. The women living there said, ‘Naomi has a son.’ And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. (Ruth 4:13-16). Naomi discovered change is hard

and that it hurts, but she also discovered that when you’re in God’s plan, change is healthy. If you had asked her up front if she wanted the changes she faced she would have said, “No way!” But she ended up with a new grandson. But this wasn’t just ANY grandson, Obed was the granddaddy of King David, and is listed in Matthew 1 as being part of the lineage of the Messiah—Jesus Christ!

If you’re part of my generation, you might remember a rock group from the 1960s and 1970s called The Young Rascals. One of their songs started, “How can I be sure, in a world that’s constantly changing, how can I be sure?” Good question, and the only way you can be sure in this world of constant change is to accept God’s unchanging love, believe God’s unchanging Word, and commit your life to God’s wonderful plan! When you do, change won’t scare you, you can embrace it with grace!

OUTLINE

1. CHANGE IS HARD: IT REMINDS US WE AREN'T IN CONTROL
2. CHANGE HURTS: IT MOVES US OUT OF OUR COMFORT ZONE
3. CHANGE IS HEALTHY: IT CAN LEAD TO NEW AND BETTER CIRCUMSTANCES

God's Blessing Equation:

God's Promise → Problems → God's Provision

4. IN CHANGING TIMES, GOD IS OUR STEADY REFUGE

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." *Psalm 46:1*

"I the Lord do not change." *Malachi 3:6*

When you're disoriented by change, confess:

- (1) God's love for me will never change!
- (2) God's Word never changes!
- (3) God's Plan for me hasn't changed!



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes