

Chapter One

SEASONS OF CHANGE

“As God makes use of all the seasons of the year for the harvest — the frost and cold of the winter, as well as the heat of the summer — so doth He (make use of) fair and foul, pleasing and unpleasing providences, for promoting holiness.”

William Gurnall

Spring came suddenly this year. One day everything was grey and brown with dead leaves layered on the ground. It seemed that the very next day there was color everywhere; there were daffodils and forsythia, purple violets and dogwood so white it hurt my eyes. But as quickly as spring had come, it was gone, leaving tender green leaves on every limb. Gradually these gave way to the deeper greens of summer and the scent of honeysuckle filled the air. Tomatoes turned red on the vine and flies buzzed round the back steps where the children were sent to eat their watermelon. For a brief time, the long, lazy days of summer made life seem almost endless. Then one day I looked out the window and noticed that the poplar tree in the backyard was turning yellow. And one morning I woke at seven o'clock and wondered why it was still so dark; it seemed that only yesterday the sun was up at five thirty!

The leaves turned quietly at first, with just a bit of color here and there, then overnight there was a riot of color up and down the street. The black maple in the yard was a golden yellow; it started at the top and worked its way down, as though someone up above were pouring butter over it. The crab apple trees across the street were a deep red, and I picked up a sweetgum leaf one day and counted five different colors on it. They were all over the ground yet many still clung to the trees, and each time the wind blew more leaves gave up and let go. Soon the trees looked like widows dressed in mourning, standing still and dark against the sky. The evergreens, which had been over shadowed by all the color, began to stand out again. The holly looked positively gay with its red berries and the nandina was glorious as it prepared to brighten the

Thanksgiving table. Quickly, Christmas passed by and then one day my husband said, "There's snow in the air." We sat up to watch the first flakes fall and in the morning everything was white. After the snow was gone, I walked around the yard. It looked so bedraggled and sad. With the toe of my shoe, I pushed some leaves aside and there was the tiny green tip of a jonquil leaf pushing through the ground. I covered it over again, hoping it wouldn't get nipped by the cold. But I went on with a smile, because I knew spring was coming again.

So on they go, the ever-changing seasons. Some years they creep by and other times they seem to fly, but always they move and change. The seasons demonstrate that change is a natural, inevitable part of life. It is necessary to life. Where there is no change there is stagnation. All living organisms are constantly changing; they are either growing or deteriorating. Have you ever walked by a pond which had no fresh water running in? Can you remember the heavy smell of stagnation, the smell of death? Can you imagine a symphony with only one note, played on one instrument, at one pitch? We could not long endure such lack of change. Without valleys, a mountain range becomes a plain. Have we not all quoted at some time the adage, "variety is the spice of life?" Change is a natural, necessary part of life.

Natural Changes

When change occurs gradually, as in the seasons, we hardly notice. Most of the changes in our lives are like that. They flow naturally and unremarkably from day to day. There is a God-appointed time for every kind of change that happens. Solomon spoke of this in Ecclesiastes 3:1-11:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

- a time to be born, and a time to die;
- a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
- a time to kill, and a time to heal;
- a time to break down, and a time to build up;
- a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
- a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
- a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
- a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
- a time to seek, and a time to lose;
- a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace...
He has made everything beautiful in its time.”

We have all had weeping times and laughing times as the result of changes in our lives. We do not have control over all such changes. We do not have control over “a time to be born and a time to die.” We may not have control over times of mourning. But there are many changes in our lives over which we do have control. We choose when to be silent and when to speak, when to keep something and when to throw it away. We decide when to obey God’s Word and when to go our own way. Our choices affect the direction of change in our lives. In a way it is like being in a boat on the water; to move toward a destination takes constant effort, to do nothing is to drift with the current. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said: “The non-Christian is being molded and manipulated by the world, whereas the Christian is a person who is in charge, in control.”

God is in Control

The thing that enables the believer to maintain control is the knowledge that his loving Heavenly Father is ultimately in control of every change. The changes that are most threatening are the changes over which we have no control — those which we must trust to our Father. For example, we are always changing physically. We are born, we grow up, we grow old, we die. We have little control over the process of aging. In a recent conversation I had with a friend about deteriorating health, she made the remark, “No matter how you look at it, the organism is dying!” And it is. From the time we are born, we begin to die. Our skin, for example, is continually changing. New skin cells are formed in the inner layer, gradually move to the top where they die and are sloughed off. In all our physical life, this is the pattern. If we have any hair when we are born, it is usually very thin. As we grow it gets thicker, even though we are continually finding hairs left in our brush. Then one day, it seems there are more hairs left in the brush than on our head. The organism is dying!

When we look to the future and consider changes that might come, it is only natural to wonder if they will bring tears or laughter. Some people play a game with themselves called “what if?” They think: “What if my husband should die, what would I do?” or, “What if I should get

cancer, how would I endure?" It is easy to work up a serious case of anxiety by anticipating changes that might occur. Christ said: "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble" (Matthew 6:34). Bill Gothard suggests that one way to work on this is to ask those "what if" questions seriously. Take one "what if" that you tend to worry about and face it with God's answers. For example: What if you should become seriously ill? God's answer: He has promised that He will never leave or forsake those who trust in Him. He will be with you in all circumstances. Bill Gothard told how he used this with a woman who came to him with many fears. He moved her through them, one by one, until they came to "what if I should die?" He asked, "What if you should die?" With a smile of joy, she answered: "I would be with the Lord!" This is the way to turn your anxieties into peace and joy.

God has given us a word of promise to meet any change that may occur. We know that change comes; that it is a natural, inevitable part of every life. But for the child of God there need be no anxiety about the future, because our heavenly Father is in control of all the changes in our lives. When Christ says, "Do not worry about tomorrow," He is saying, "Trust Me with tomorrow."

Our Responsibility

We who believe in Jesus do not just drift through the happenstances of life. God in His sovereign wisdom has given us a responsibility for our choices in life. It is by our choices that we exercise some control over the changes we experience. To a degree we can even slow the process of physical aging by proper diet and exercise. On the other hand if we choose not to exercise, our physical muscles become weak and wasted. Indeed, change is taking place all the time in every sphere of life, whether physical or spiritual. And if we are not changing positively we are changing negatively. Inactivity causes deterioration. Da Vinci said: "Iron rusts from disuse; stagnant water loses its purity, and in cold weather becomes frozen; even so does inaction sap the vigors of the mind." The same principle is true in the spiritual realm. Spiritual life that is not active and growing becomes stale and loses vitality.

By God's grace and the indwelling power of His Spirit, the process of spiritual deterioration may be changed into growth. For this to take place, we must be born again. Our natural, sinful self is always inclined to go backward or downward, away from God. But when Christ regen-

erates us, His Spirit within us becomes like a magnet drawing us upward toward God. We are turned from a continuous downward path spiritually and enabled to grow upward into Christ-likeness. That is God's design for all His children.

This truth is clearly taught in Romans 8:28-29: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. . ." God has a design for all our lives, and He is using the changes in our circumstances to fulfill His ultimate purpose for us. In Psalm 37:4, David says: "Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart." And in verses 23-24 he says: "The steps of a man are established by the LORD, when he delights in his way; though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the LORD upholds his hand." Because God is faithful, we can face the inevitability of change without fear!

As we get older, it takes God's grace and our determination to face each day as an adventure with the Lord. We will have to face changes or attempt things that we never thought possible. But God's grace will always be sufficient for the changes He brings into our lives.

There will never be a time when God's children can think that their service to the Lord is over. The form of service may change, but they always have a service to render to Him. For example, your service in the church may be interrupted by the need to care for an elderly parent. That, too, is service to be offered to the Lord. Perhaps a real test of our love for the Lord is the way in which we accept the changes and perform the service concerning which we have no choice.

When we are tempted to worry or fret about what might happen, we should remember that change is a natural part of every day of every life; and that although we are responsible for many of the changes in our lives, God is ultimately in control of all change. Christ said: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matthew 10:29-30). God knows how many hairs were left in your brush this morning. If such trivial changes are within His providence, how much more is He concerned about the things that change our lives from day to day.

Question 11 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism says: "What are God's works of providence?" and the answer: "God's works of providence are, His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions." That says it all!

An Illustration from Scripture:

Read Genesis 18:9-15.

1. From reading this Scripture, would you say that Sarah knew God's will for her? How did she know it?
2. What was her attitude toward God's promise? Did she think it was possible?
3. What emotions do you think a woman would experience if she became pregnant for the first time when she was over eighty years old?

Think how Sarah must have felt. She had given up any hope of having children. Perhaps she felt that her life was about over and she didn't have much purpose for living. Oh, she had not given up completely. She would go on caring for Abraham as long as she could, but she didn't look forward too much in the future.

4. What is your attitude toward the promises of God's Word? Sarah laughed. But notice what the angel said to Sarah when she laughed. "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" What is your answer to that question?

Do you truly believe that nothing in your life is too hard for Him? Perhaps you would like to embroider this verse in cross stitch and hang it where you will be continually reminded not to laugh when the Lord asks you to make some seemingly impossible change.

Now read Genesis 21:1-7.

5. What was Sarah's attitude toward God's Word after Isaac's birth?
6. How would you describe the difference in Sarah's laughter in Genesis 18:12 and in Genesis 21:6?

Matthew Henry, regarding the promise of Isaac's birth, said: "The thing was so highly improbable, so near to impossible, that if anyone but God had said it we could not have believed it."

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some natural changes that you have noticed this week?
2. What is the most dramatic change that has occurred in the world or in this country during your lifetime?
3. In what ways is society different today than what it was ten years ago?
4. What are some other Scriptural examples or verses that show that God is in control of change?

Areas of Consideration for Personal Change:

1. Think about an area in your life in which you have not been trusting God's control over change. Prayerfully surrender that area to Him.
2. Is there an area in your life in which your choices have been causing a lack of spiritual growth? If so, determine by God's grace to make positive choices in that area. Write here your plan for positive change.