

1 Samuel 12

Intro July 20, 2008 Change Flowing from Faith

You've heard the saying, "Change is the only constant in life."¹ But must change be celebrated? Is change something to always embrace and seek. What's wrong with status quo? I like the predictable, except when it is my struggles...or your struggles. Then change can be more enjoyable.

Often when we think of change, fear is our first emotion. Most people do not like to think of change, because it feels like something out of our control. When you think of change what feelings come to mind; fear, doubt, anxiety, terror, dread, the unknown, unexpected, anger?

Or do you look at change with feelings of: excitement, enthusiasm, anticipation, hopefulness, eagerness or even joy?

It may well depend on what kind of change one talks about. Rhonda Smith, a life coach who specializes helping people transition through change, identifies the several faces of change.

The first face is Reactionary Change.

This is the type of change that occurs suddenly, and therefore we must react. An example of this type of change could be an accident, a death, a sudden loss of a job, illness or a divorce. The change requires us to react and realign our life with little preparation.

Another face of change is Anticipatory Change.

With this type of change you have advance warning, so you are able to anticipate the change. An example could be retirement, getting married, moving to a new city, or having a baby. This type of change allows us to plan for the effects on our life, we have warning that may prepare us or frighten us all the more.

And then there is the Unknown Feeling Change.

With this type of change, you may not know exactly why you want a change; you just know you want something different. Examples of this type of change maybe choosing a new place to live or trying something new at your favorite restaurant. This type of change allows you to explore choices and options. It flows from the feeling in your gut that you're in a rut. Here change may get you in trouble, as you seek change, but don't really know what needs changing.

The last face of change is Not Quite Right Change.

With this type of change you feel that something is not quite right and there's something better. This type of change may be deciding to redecorate the house, get a new car, or just make an improvement in your life. With this change you are seeking a change for the better. You may know what to change, but now comes the hard part, enacting the change.

In this section of 1 Samuel there are a lot of changes going on. It is a time of tremendous transition.

Saul is now king. There is a new political atmosphere in Israel and an old enemy is now defeated. Gone is the old way of running the country. The tribal system with various judges raised up by God in response to invading armies is passé. Imagine the chariot arriving at Gilgal with the bumper sticker reading: *Change You Can Believe In...or ... Reform-Prosperity-Peace*. There is now a sense of national cohesion and what better way to celebrate that unity than to have a king.

Samuel, the final judge, is now out of a job. It is time for his retirement speech and the gold sundial. His death will not take place for another 13 chapters and he will oversee the anointing of a new king and the deposing of the old. His role is not ended, but this final public speech helps us today think more clearly about change. READ 1 Samuel 12

CHANGE IS A PART OF LIFE 1-6

Samuel is about to fade to the background as Saul is now hailed at the pre-eminent leader of Israel. As the people gather at Gilgal, the site of their first consecration upon entering the Promised Land 300 years earlier under Joshua's leadership, they celebrate the victory over the Ammonites and the ascendancy of Saul to kingship.

But Samuel maintains control with parting words that take the form of a trial. One can taste his displeasure at what has transpired as Israel clamored for a king, thereby rejecting Samuel.

He has done what he was called to do; he installed a king over them. That king is now in place over the people and he, Samuel, is old and gray. Notice how he refers to his sons, who the

people rejected in chapter 8 for they did not walk in Samuel's ways. The sons are "with you", not "over you" (v1) as the king is.

He then calls for the people to bring their accusations against him, if there is any offense. Has he taken anything that was not his, abused his power or taken a bribe. If so, he will make it right. These are the offenses that Samuel in 8:10ff said a king would do. He has not.

The people acknowledge his integrity, complete with oath, as though Samuel were on a witness stand (5). Although aging, Samuel has not changed. He remained consistently honorable in his dealings with God's people. That kind of leader will not be known in Israel for some time. Samuel is preparing them for change – a change he has warned that will bring heartache in the years ahead. Samuel handles this change with firmness and grace. In the face of personal rejection, he accepts change by pointing to a God who never changes.

This introductory section sets the scene. It pits Samuel against Saul and all future kings in Israel. His opening remarks give a sense of someone wrestling with bitterness, of being left behind.

When we are young, we fight for change. When we are older we fight change. Through it all we think we don't change while the world around us is constantly changes...until we look in the mirror. As with Samuel, we may not like the changes that come in our world, in our church, in our minds and bodies. We are not required to embrace all change as automatically good, but we need not live in fear of it either. What Samuel does is a wonderful example when faced with change that is not particularly pleasant, when it is personally painful...

First, maintain integrity. Don't let the change around be an excuse for negative response in your own life. Never blame your having to change on the change of culture around. Second, find your stability in God's unchanging character. This is what Samuel will unfold in the coming verses, but begins with this review of history in v6ff.

When faced with change happening around us we should find our hope in the unchanging God. But what about when we know that the change we need is internal and personal.

As Christians we can easily imagine that personal change, lifestyle improvement is something we should embrace. But a dangerous conclusion may result if we think that a change in our circumstances or even a change in behavior is sufficient for the kind of change God desires.

CHANGE ALONE IS NOT REPENTANCE 7-19

Samuel reviews Israel's past, but he is giving more than a history lesson. There is an underlying theme of what real change looks like, of what repentance is all about.

In v7 he states the case: God has done righteous deeds for you and your fathers.

Samuel walks through their common story: Jacob went to Egypt, they were oppressed, the people cried out and the Lord rescued them and they forgot the Lord...and the cycle continues. Thus begins the pattern of Judges of people forgetting their God who remembers them.

What is your response to that cycle? I find it depressing. God comes to the rescue of those who constantly forget his goodness. Does there not come a point where the cycle will be broken. If the people do not change, is there a point at which God ceases to forgive?

That brings us to v12, to what recently took place in Israel.

Put yourself in the shoes of the average Israelite. You have three hundred years of constant failure, of spiritual amnesia regarding God's goodness, of oppression and God having to raise up leaders to rescue your people. Nothing has changed. Change is what is needed.

With the last onslaught, Nahash the Eye Gouger, enough was enough.

I would suggest that their call for a king was not simple desire for conformity, but a desire for real and lasting change. They wanted something good...but in all the wrong ways. They wanted to change the cycle of sin, but they wanted to be good...without God. His forgiveness and grace were no longer in view. It was forgotten.

But their forgetting grace does not mean they don't want to be better. They desire change, want to break the cycle. The trouble is they seek change without repentance, without dependence upon God's grace. They wanted a change that would protect them from the failures of the past and ensure them of safety for the future. They wanted to be good without God's grace.

The request is evil because it shows the heart of idolatry – it wants change without God, without confessing sin, without trusting God's gracious protection.

They see their calamities as merely a political situation that can be remedied by a pragmatic political solution. They can change the problem by avoiding talking about sin and calling on their own native abilities to make things better.

Even as they seek to change themselves apart from grace, God is gracious.

With a new leader in place, the command remains as it always has – fear the Lord, serve, obey, and do not rebel against His Law (14). If they do not repent, if they only seek superficial change, God's displeasure will be known. How will that displeasure be seen?

In v16 we see God means business. Samuel reminds them and informs us what God will do.

In v17 Samuel calls on God to send thunder and rain. The people get a clear picture of their predicament when they seek change without repentance.

This may be nothing more than primitive people fearful of cosmological phenomena. But something more critical is going on than that.

The wheat harvest is in early June. A month into the dry season, a time of year when rain is about as rare as snow in Miami on Memorial Day. But there is more than that. It is not just that rain is rare, but during wheat harvest could spell famine. As the heads of wheat are full, a storm with torrential rains could ruin the crop. But it is more than just that they would be without food. The natural order of life, the cycle of the season would be disrupted. It would be an unwelcome change, as though God would not hold up his end of the deal. God would change, not healthy for His people.

The same thing happens in our lives, too.

We grow weary of the cycle of sin in our lives. We know it is offensive to God, we want to change. We've confessed our sins to those we've offended, especially God, yet we are still the same.

Nothing has changed. Maybe we need a different kind of change?

After all, doesn't God grow weary of our constant failures? We tire of others who let us down more than twice. How often have we failed God? So since confession of sin and trying again seems to not be working, why not try another form of change. A change of packaging may be enough. A new label, a different approach.

Just because I stop X, I have not necessarily repented. If I cease getting drunk, break of the illicit relationship or just stop being so grouchy...all that is wonderful, but is it real change? People come for counseling hoping for a fix and leave frustrated when they still struggle. But they miss the point. God's concern is not with the struggle itself, but He calls us to look to Christ as our only help and hope.

Our passage is not focused on individuals, but on the body as a whole. We could apply it to the church body. Do you know people who have given up on the church because it failed once, twice, two hundred times? They may go after a different form...forget the institutional church, a house church is less prone to failure. Now we can recapture what it means to be a better Christian.

What lie have you believed to get to this point?

Can the church eradicate sin from its midst? Are we able to finally get it right so we don't need God's forgiveness? Is His forgiveness for sins of the past, but we won't need it in the future? We buy into the same lie of Israel: we can mature beyond the need for grace and forgiveness, with the use of the right means, better techniques; we can transcend the need for repentance. All we need to do is change, not repent.

CHANGES COMES BY GOD'S CHANGELESS GRACE 20-25

When we recognize that a relationship with God is not about manipulating change in one's life, that the cycle of sin and forgiveness is the changeless pattern of God's grace, then real change can take place.

Samuel is clear – they have done evil. Repentance is necessary. Obedience is not an option.

Up to this point they turned to something that is empty, that will not profit or give them the relief they desired. Change for change sake will never change us. Reforming our habits may be necessary to get along in the world. Being a better person is wonderful in itself. Growing as a human and doing good is a great thing. Don't ever stop changing.

But the moment we think that that change will right the wrongs, will improve our standing before God, can take the place of repentance, of trusting Christ alone – then we are trusting something that is empty. An external change is like putting lipstick on a pig. It doesn't make the pig any more appealing, only mad.

What is the answer? V22 God will not forsake his people. He does not grow weary of grace. Why? Not based on inherent goodness or the great strides one makes, but because of his great name's sake, because God is pleased to make us His people.

Your previous positive changes to reform your life were not the basis for God's love of you. What makes you think you can change his affection now? God's grace and acceptance flows from his character, his nature. It comes from the promise He made, a promise that will never change.

We hear that in Romans 8 passage. Notice how the statements are not predicated on performance, but on God's act before we were born. Condemnation is gone; we have been set free from the law of sin and death. Sin is already condemned.

How do we then change? We see a hint of it in this section, too. We are not in the flesh but in the Spirit who dwells in us. If you belong to Christ, Christ is in you.

So when you fail...and you will, you do...what then? Confess. Join the cycle we read of in Judges – cry out to the Lord when you see the change that is needed. Don't run off to make promises of change, trusting in something that is empty.

How do you know you will change? The same reason the Israelites had hope (v23)

Just as Samuel knew that as their priest he must pray for them and continue to instruct them, how much more can we be certain that Christ, our Great High Priest prays for us.

We see this in John 17. (read vv9-12) We have the hope that we will be kept, guarded, protected. The promise of change, of growth, of being made holy is found in v17. There Jesus prays for us, that we would be sanctified in the truth.

Where does this leave us today? What am I to do in light of this when I see areas in my life I wish to change? There is so much in my life that needs changing. On the simplest level...I know I do not obey God as I should.

I can try harder, do better...I've tried that and have failed.

Maybe a different technique, a new book, another church is the answer.

At the end of the day, to be changed by God grace, to be made into what God desires me to be will come only because God will be true to His own name. That is where I must place my trust for any real and lasting change. I must trust...and only then will I ever obey.

¹ Adapted from an article by Rhonda Smith <http://www.articlesnatch.com/Article/CELEBRATING-CHANGE/24606>