

# What Does Godly Change Look Like?



by Heather L. Rice

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Change.

We all look for it in the folks we minister to. We want to see people transformed by the amazing Gospel of Christ. We pour ourselves out in ministry in order to see someone's entire world revolutionized by the grace of God.

But if you're anything like me, there are times when, in your heart of hearts, you step back and wonder, "Does anybody ever *really* change?" All around me, I see people doing the same old stuff, stumbling into the same old sins. Yet the Bible promises quite a different reality. The Spirit of God lives and works in the hearts of believers to make them more and more like Christ. God promises to make us "oaks of righteousness" (Isa. 61:3). So why don't I always see it happening?

Many times I don't see change because I've been looking for the wrong thing. Growth in Christ is not all or nothing. In our search for big, dramatic change, we sometimes miss the glorious "small" victories and we miss, minimize, or ignore God's work in our lives. We do a disservice to those we counsel. We do a disservice to ourselves. We do a disservice to the glory of God. We need to first recognize His work in our own lives through these small victories if we hope to help others recognize

God's work of growth and change in their lives.

## *The Heat of Circumstances*

What does godly change really look like? Let me tell you a story. I serve fulltime at the Whosoever Gospel Mission where we provide residential Christ-centered rehabilitation and job readiness services to homeless men. Each fall we have a banquet to celebrate the Lord's blessing and goodness to us. A couple hundred people come out in support of the ministry, and it's my job as the executive assistant to handle everything from the reservations to the decorations and many things in between. The night of the banquet, there is a very short window of time when we can get into the room to set up before the doors open to our guests. So for about one hour, there is a frantic wind-storm of activity while the executive director, Bob, and I set everything up.

As custom and tradition would have it, a representative from the restaurant always offers us drinks as we set up. Now this particular evening I was looking intently for this person because my throat was sore and I was incredibly thirsty. My heart was set on a ginger ale. In the midst of all this, Bob's wife, Marcia (who was and is a dear friend), showed up to offer some much needed help. I gave her a job to do and she reported back to me for another job when she had finished the first one. In passing, I

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mentioned to her that I was thirsty and waiting to catch the guy from the restaurant. But she replied, "Oh, he was just in here and asked me if we wanted anything to drink. I said, 'No, we're fine. Thanks.' He said he'd bring us some water anyway."

That simple, strongly desired, but undelivered, ginger ale brought out sin from the depths of my heart.

### ***The Entangling Thorns of Sin***

I just kind of smiled at her with a plastic, pasted-on smile and said "Oh, really?" My heart flooded with anger towards my dear friend: "Who does she think she is?! She answers to me—I'm the one in charge! How dare she answer for me!" Anger coursed through my veins as I continued setting up for this great celebration of God's goodness!

I knew how awful and ungodly my attitude was, but my emotions were powerful! I called out to the Lord for mercy and grace as we opened the doors and I put on my "PR" face to greet our supporters.

And that was not the last of my anger issues that evening. After the end of each banquet, Bob typically drives me home. During the drive we talk about the people we connected with, the feedback we received, and the overall blessing of the Lord upon the evening and our ministry. This night, however, God had something different planned, and it knocked the smile off my face and the contents of my heart right out into public view.

Several staff members stayed and reminisced about the evening after everyone else had left. Just as we were about to leave, Bob turned to me and said, "Heather, would you mind if Marcia drove you home tonight?" Well, what in the world could I say? "No, Bob, I really do mind if Marcia takes me home. This is our time for 'ministry talk' and she's not really a part of this ministry—she's only your wife!" That wasn't a possibility, so I donned yet another pasted on, plastic grin and said, "Sure."

Well I was fit to be tied! What did I do? I got in her car, laid my head back and turned my face toward the window. I threw in a few complimentary yawns so as not to seem overly rude. I was just tired, and understandably so, after all, I was the one in full-time ministry who

just finished with the biggest public relations event of the year. Marcia tried asking a few questions about how things went and how I was doing. But I gave her, at most, one word responses in hopes that she would get the hint that I was too tired to talk.

### ***The Cross of Christ Brings New Identity***

And then it happened—one of the most glorious moments of change in my life.

On the surface it may seem pathetically insignificant, but to me it was huge. The Lord graciously intervened and the inward battle began. "Hey, little girl, just who do you think you are? Did You forget who I AM? I am the One who made you, who redeemed you, who gave you this ministry, who holds your very life and breath right now in My hand. How quickly you forget! Did you also forget that I am sovereign? I put you where I want you, with whom I want you, when I want you there. So cut it out! Deny yourself and follow me."

With residual emotions still swirling within me, I cried out to God from my heart, "Here goes, Lord. Help me!" And with that, I turned from the window toward Marcia and began talking to her. I don't remember the actual conversation, but I just know that I talked with and listened to her as a friend, as a sister in Christ whom God had intentionally placed in my life for those forty-five minutes that evening.

### ***The Fruit of a Changed Heart and Life***

So what's the big deal? A war raged in my heart, but a battle had just been won. This is precisely where the battle is won—in the small choices of each and every moment of our lives. Do I look out the car window, or do I look to my friend? Do I wallow in self-pity, or do I engage a sister in Christ? Do I nurse my bitterness, or do I cry out, "Help me, Lord, to do the right thing."

That's what the call of faith is all about! In the moment that my heart swirls in anger, I can choose to walk by faith and trust God, or I can choose to walk by sight and desperately try to fulfill the lusts of my heart in my own way. I have this choice every moment of every day. And each time I choose the way of faith, it is a victory and a testament to the righteous work of God in my life.

### *Applying the Lesson*

But choosing the way of faith is easier said than done. How do we encourage ourselves and our counselees to choose faith in the midst of heart-breaking, devastating situations? To answer that, let's look to a woman we know well from Scripture.

Hannah was deeply troubled. "She, greatly distressed, prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly" (1 Sam. 1:10). Unable to get pregnant, she lived in a society that viewed fertility as a sign of God's blessing and barrenness as His curse. Her husband, Elkanah, had another wife, Peninah, who, when compared to Hannah, seemed like the female incarnation of the Fertile Crescent! Peninah repeatedly taunted and ridiculed Hannah, provoking her to bitterness. Hannah was so distressed she couldn't eat with the family. Weeping, she retreated from the table to

### *Change*

Change occurs, not necessarily in the circumstances, but in hearts, in relationship with God, in relationship with people. We know the agony of suffering from the heat of our own circumstances, so it is natural for us to cry out with Hannah as she pleads with the Lord to change her situation. How do we pray when our father has cancer; when our daughter runs away from home; when we go to bed night after night alone, unmarried; when our baby lingers halfway between life and death? Like Hannah, who poured out her soul before the Lord (1 Sam. 1:15), we plead, we implore God with all our heart and soul to change our circumstances, to restore life, to reconcile relationships, to ease our pain.

Sometimes our prayers seem unanswered and that which we feared becomes reality. Sometimes the Lord grants our petitions and we

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her tent to be alone.

This taunting and withdrawal cycle continued on year after year after year. To make matters worse, Elkanah did not show sensitivity to Hannah's anguish. In an attempt to comfort her, he added to her sorrow by minimizing her pain. Hannah's whole world seemed to be against her—her society, her husband's second wife, and her own perceptions all spoke out to condemn her as a hopeless failure.

Sometimes life just hurts so much it seems to come crashing to a halt in a flood of bitter tears. It felt that way for Hannah. How can we possibly expect to choose faith when bitterness overwhelms us, when tears flood our soul, and we are swept off our feet in despair? This vignette of Hannah's life poignantly demonstrates a life-restoring word of hope for anyone crushed under the weight of this world's devastation. Something transpired in Hannah's universe that changed everything, and it wasn't her circumstances.

rejoice greatly for a season. But much of life is lived in the middle—in waiting and praying and pleading—in the yearnings of uncertainty.

That is where the call to faith rings loudest. And it also happens to be where this word of hope arises. When Hannah poured out her soul before the Lord in the temple, she did not get an audible response from God assuring her that her request was granted. She did not miraculously conceive a child in the temple court, nor did she go home to a different husband, a different family or a different society.

Yet, something happened with Hannah. Her countenance changed, the frantic casting about of her heart ceased, her weeping stopped, and her face lifted. She arose, went home, and ate. Something incredible transpired between the temple gate and the altar that isn't really mentioned in 1 Samuel 1.

Psalms 73 holds the key that unlocks the mystery of Hannah's transformation and the hope for our own. The psalmist could identify with Hannah's turmoil. He, too, was oppressed.

He too saw his oppressors prosper in their arrogance. Both Hannah and the psalmist were deeply troubled by their circumstances. They could both declare, “When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight.”

Surely God is good to Israel,  
To those who are pure in heart!  
But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling,  
My steps had almost slipped.  
For I was envious of the arrogant  
As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

When my heart was embittered  
And I was pierced within,  
Then I was senseless and ignorant;  
I was like a beast before You.  
Nevertheless I am continually with You;  
You have taken hold of my right hand.  
With Your counsel You will guide me,  
And afterward receive me to glory.  
Whom have I in heaven but You?  
And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.  
My flesh and my heart may fail,  
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.  
(Ps. 73: 1-3, 21-26)

Before either of their circumstances changed, an amazing transformation took place that enabled them in the moment to choose faith. It all turns on this phrase: “until I entered the sanctuary of God; and then I perceived their end.” Hannah and the psalmist both had an encounter with the living God that completely rearranged their lives. After consciously coming into the sanctuary of God, though their circumstances remained exactly the same, their hearts were different. The psalmist’s fear and anger, once so consuming, dissipated when he realized that the Lord had hold of his hand and was guiding him with perfect counsel, pointing ahead to the glory to come. We cannot help but be changed when we come alone before the King of Creation and encounter His glory.

Why could the psalmist choose faith? Because he remembered the bigger picture—that God is still on His throne, that this world does not have the final say, and that this God,

far from being a concept or a religion, is real, living, powerful, and deeply committed to carrying out all that He has promised and planned to do according to all His great and precious promises to His people.

### ***Lift Your Gaze***

What struggle doesn’t pale in comparison to this truth? In counseling, then, let us not forget that we are the hands of Christ that prod one another to lift up our gaze past the troubles that afflict us and see the hugeness of His presence, the majesty of His power and the faithfulness of His dedication to do all that He said He will do in and through us—including the promise to keep on sanctifying us until the day we meet Him in glory. As we cast ourselves on His mercy, He transforms the desires of our hearts; He redirects our affections; He sets our longings on Himself. Then, with the greatest of pleasure, He delights to fulfill our newfound desire as He increasingly makes known to us the fullness of blessing that is ours in His presence. It’s as though He calls to us, “Seek Me, and I promise you will find Me. I *want* you to find Me.”

Turning from self and choosing the way of faith in any given moment is a whole lot less scary when you realize that what you find at the end is nothing short of the Father’s warm embrace. The choice to make that turn in any given moment is what godly change really looks like. It’s not often too loud or ostentatious, so you may very well miss it if you don’t look carefully. Let us not minimize the awesome work of God in the lives of His children as they make huge choices of faith in the mundane circumstances of everyday life. God promises that He will sanctify His people. If we don’t see it, then we are missing the most incredible displays of His glorious grace all around us. Let us strive to become experts at recognizing and praising the hand of God at work in and around us, to the praise of the glory of His grace!