

Change is possible

Jeremiah 18:1-6

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As you look out at this new year and think about yourself at the heart level, what do you wish you could change? If you could ask God to make one change in your life that would make you more like Jesus, what would you ask Him to change in you?

Do you think this type of deep change is possible? I am talking about real change at the heart level. A change that happens at the core of who a person is and changes their perspective, their attitudes, their desires, their beliefs and even their behavior.

What we see in the world often convinces us that true change is not possible. We see people enslaved to anger, or bitterness, or addiction, or sinful ways of living and relating with others, and it seems like they will never change. We see the same in ourselves. We seem to be held captive by the same behaviors or desires as we have always been. It often brings us to the conclusion that true, lasting change is not possible. But that is not what we see in the scripture for those who have put their faith in God.

We see the man in scripture who was possessed by a legion of demons, but who was dramatically changed after coming face to face with Christ. We read about Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho who put her faith in God, hid the Jewish spies, and eventually became the great, great grandmother of King David. We remember Zacchaeus who was a wealthy tax collector who stole from his own people in the name of Rome. We read his words in Luke 19:8, after his encounter with Christ: ***"Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, 'Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.'"*** One cannot forget the testimony of the apostle Paul, who went from being a persecutor of Christians to one who now championed the Christian faith even in the face of death. Christianity is the story of life change. If we ever stop believing in the possibility of change, we lose the true essence of the Gospel.

God is committed to change in the lives of His people. We find an interesting analogy of this in Jeremiah 18:1-6:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the Lord came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel."

This verse is a picture of God working in the lives of the Nation of Israel. The verses say that God is like the potter and the nation of Israel is like the clay. The clay was marred. In Hebrew that meant that it was ruined. It was useless. It could no longer be used for its intended purpose. The nation of Israel had been created to be the people of God. They were to so rightly relate to God that they would be blessed by Him. This was intended to draw the other nations of the world to follow God as well. But now, because of their rebellion and idol worship, they had ruined this possibility and testimony to the world.

Even in the midst of this they were still in God's hands. "In His hands" meant they were in His care. The sovereign God was still watching over and actively involved in their lives. The Potter formed or worked in their situation with a particular end goal in mind. But when the clay was marred, the Potter would start over again to shape it into "another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him". This was a clear example of God returning the clay to a lump on the potter's wheel and starting over as God saw fit.

When one learns how to make pottery, it gives this illustration even clearer application. Many potters start out by working or massaging the clay. This works out any air bubbles or lumps that would ruin the final product in the end, when placed in the furnace. They soften and moisten the clay. The clay is then placed on the wheel where the sculpting takes place. If at any time in this process a crack or stiffness emerges, the sculpture is then destroyed and returned to being a lump of clay. The problem is remedied, and the shaping process starts over. Once the piece of pottery is finally sculpted the way the potter wants it, then it is glazed and eventually put into the kiln or furnace at over 1,300 degrees Celsius. Can you think of any of your life experiences that were used by God to purify, shape, reform, or refine you, to make you into something beautiful?

That is an amazing idea. The God of the universe is intimately working in our lives to change us to be like Christ (Romans 8:28-29), but how is this change possible? Before we look for the solution, we must first understand what has brought us to the place where change is needed.

In the beginning God created man and woman, and they enjoyed perfect communion with God. There was no shame, no guilt, no fear, and no hate. It was life as it ought to be.

It was a perfect situation. Mankind had been created with root desires for love, hope, peace, value, joy, security, and so much more. God was the One who created mankind and could fulfill man's root desires. This truth is reflected in the names of God that one finds in Scripture.

We long for sustenance, and He is our Provider and Chief Shepherd (Gen 22:14; Matt 6:25-34; 1 Pet 5:1-4; Ps 23). We long for peace, and He is our Shalom and Prince of Peace (Judg 6:24; Isa 9:6). We long for order, and He is our Sovereign God, Creator, Wonderful Counselor (Ps 109:21; Gen 1; Isa 9:6). We long for freedom from sin, and He is our Deliverer, King of kings and Lord of lords (2 Sam 22:2; Ps 18:2; 1 Tim 6:15; 1 Cor 10:13). We long for joy, and in him we find the presence of Joy (Ps 16:11).

As Adam and Eve related to God intimately, they found that their root desires were met in him. Every root desire that mankind had was a path that led them back to God. For Adam and Eve there was no need to look anywhere else. God was truly their All-Sufficient One. In Cornelius Plantinga Jr.'s words, this perfect union between God, man, and creation was *"Shalom. . . life as it was meant to be."*¹

Then it happened. Mankind turned their hearts away from God and sinned. Adam, Eve, a tree, a serpent, a lie, some fruit, and the first sin changed the world forever (Gen 3:1-24). This "fall of man" drove a wedge between man and God. Spiritual death was the consequence (Rom 7:9-10; Eph 2:1-5; Col 2:13-15). Because of sin, mankind was now cut off from God, the only one who could truly fulfill their root desires. Now pain, doubt, guilt, shame, anger, worry and death would be a part of the human experience. From Adam, all his descendants would now inherit a sin nature that would enslave them to sin and its dominion.

A God-centered life of provision and peace had now been replaced by a man-centered life of need and uncertainty. Since the resources of God were no longer available, man's only option was now to turn to the world to try to fulfill their root desires. This would be an exercise of futility. What was lost could never be regained by man's efforts.

However, glory to God that he came for us when we could not rescue ourselves. God, in his patience and long-suffering, chose to reclaim what had formerly been his.

Romans 5:6-8 describes it this way: *"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

Christ has restored what was lost for those who repent and put their faith in Him. In this reconciliation the doors are open once again; firstly, for an intimate relationship with God, and secondly, for one's root desires to be fulfilled in him.

Ephesians 1:3 proclaims, *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."* It is the restoration of the all-sufficient intimacy that man had with God in the Garden of Eden.

¹ Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 10.

We no longer need to look elsewhere. One must understand that the cross and resurrection of Christ is not only a source of salvation. It is one's sufficiency for life. It has the power to practically change every aspect of one's existence. This is a truth that is available to all believers, but that far too many miss.

In Christ we see that mankind has the opportunity to be reconciled to God and to find their desires once again fulfilled in him (Rom 5:10). But is it possible for one who has returned to God to miss out on the provisions of God? Why do so many Christians seem to still be searching for a way to fulfill the root desires of life?

It would be similar to a man who is set free after having been a slave all his life. His identity has changed. He is a freeman. That is great, but he must learn how to live as a freeman, or his newfound liberty will provide minimal benefits. It also could be compared to a foreigner who becomes a citizen. We arrive in this new "spiritual country" with a new legal status. We now have full rights as citizens and can make a claim on all the resources that the government offers, but if we do not understand the culture of the new country or what resources are now at our disposal, the new citizenship, practically speaking, means nothing to us. In scripture we also see it compared to a child who is adopted. By law the child can never be put away and has the same legal rights as a biological son. All of his needs are now met, but if he does not believe that it is true, he will continue to scavenge for food in the trash, missing out on the daily meals that are set on the family table at mealtime.

Many have come into salvation and have been miraculously freed from pornography, drugs, alcohol, or other habitual sins. Glory to God for these testimonies. At the same time, there are many children of God who celebrated their freedom at first, but then soon realized that they had no idea how to live in it. That is often times because of their deeply engrained patterns of the flesh. When faced with struggles, temptations, or fears, they have more confidence in their old sin patterns than in the promises of God. Because of this, they are like the slaves who find their freedom, but then choose to return to slavery, "preferring the actual rule of their past masters" to their new life that is promised but has yet to be fully experienced. As the writers of Hebrews would say, they lack a faith that is *"sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see"* (Heb 11:1).

This struggle is not just for new believers. All believers have this same choice to make. They have been reconciled with God. Will they now believe in His promises and trust in His provision, or will they take it upon themselves to once again fulfill their own desires and live as if they have no God? The patterns of the flesh are vain and empty, but they have become so familiar and so predictable that many would rather choose a certain counterfeit than to believe in the promised fulfillment found in Christ.

To walk intimately with Christ and to experience His sufficiency, one must begin to see the true value of Christ and the true worthlessness of the flesh patterns of this world. It is at this point that God often enters and uses hardship (Hebrews 12:7) to weaken our allegiance to this world and realize that this world will never be able to keep its promises for our deliverance. God at times will strip us of the things that we trust in most to reveal the idols of our hearts and where our hope is misplaced. God does not want us to settle for less than His sufficiency in all things.

Two factors have nurtured our rebellion against God. The first was our sin nature. The second was out of necessity. Since our sin separated us from God and all of His resources, we turned to the world just trying to survive. After years of trying to meet our own needs and trusting in the world, we each have formed habitual patterns of pride, self-reliance, and sin, trying to make life work, but it never will.

In Jesus Christ all of this has now been taken care of. Because of our sin nature and our separation from God, all of our hearts originally desired the things of the world, its priorities and living a life without God. In scripture, this natural man, without Christ, is described as blinded by the god of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4). Our minds were futile. We were darkened in our understanding. We were alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in us, due to the hardness of our hearts (Ephesians 4:17-25). To us the message of the gospel was foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18). That was the original condition and direction of our hearts.

When we believed in Jesus Christ, repentance occurred. As one puts his faith in Jesus Christ, it is accompanied by a repentant heart, a heart that has been turned away from its original direction of self and sin and now desires Christ and holiness. A Christian is a new creation. ***“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come”*** (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The Christian is a new person. Yes, they still look the same and have some of the same characteristics, but at the core of who they are they have been made new. They have been forgiven. They have been freed from their selfish desires and their “old selves”. They are no longer slaves to sin. Something totally new has come. The old sinful person has died. Galatians 2:20 states, ***“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”***

Because of repentance, true faith results in good works. This is not adding a second requirement, faith plus works, for salvation. It is merely describing what saving faith entails. Saving faith will always be accompanied by repentance that results in life change. Scripture gives us no other option.

To daily gain the benefits of salvation each day we must continue to believe and repent. We must exercise our faith in Christ and turn from any idols that have risen up in our hearts.

So, how do we do this? Some would turn immediately to religious rules and rituals. Discipline does play a role in the Christian life, but it is desire and not duty that draws one into holiness. It is as our desire for Christ increases that all competing desires lose their power.

In Greek mythology, the Sirens would sing enchanting songs that would mesmerize the approaching sailors to the point that they would be drawn towards the rocks and their destruction. Odysseus had his crew fill their ears with wax and told them to tie him to the mast so he would be held back from giving in to the Sirens’ enchanting songs. This is similar to the ways that we often try to bring about holy change in our lives by piling on more rules, disciplines and penalties.

Orpheus chose another strategy for his crew. He played such beautiful music with his harp that they did not even notice the music of the sirens, because they were so enthralled by the music of Orpheus. That

is the way to holiness and change. It is not by fixing our attention on the temptation, but it is in fixing our eyes on Christ. As the old hymn says, *“Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace.”*

Change rests on faith and repentance. This is what brought us into salvation and what will carry us through our lifetime of faith. Faith puts our trust in the finished work of Christ in our lives; our new freedom in Christ to turn from sin and the resources of God that are now at our disposal since we have been reconciled to Him. Sin no longer has a leg to stand on. We sin merely because we believe the lie, but there is nothing that forces us to walk in sin any longer. Any sense of being trapped that we feel when facing a temptation is nothing more than a spiritual smoke screen. It has no substance to it. We are free. Oh, it feels strong and it seems real, but in reality it is merely held up by the deception of the evil one.

Repentance is a turning our hearts away from sin and towards Christ. Repentance accompanied faith at salvation and continues to be the same every day of our Christian lives. Our hearts are prone to wander and to make idols of our desires. Because of this, on a daily basis we must submit to God and turn from any idols that have taken root in our hearts.

Faith is turning towards Christ, and repentance is at the same time turning away from the world.

As we seek God-honoring change in our lives we must nurture both faith and repentance. May we turn to God’s Word that we might be able to stand on His truth. May we turn to prayer as we humble ourselves before His wisdom and His provision. May we turn to Christian community as we seek to speak truth and grace to one another and bear each other’s burdens. May we turn to worship as we seek to make much of Christ in our hearts. May we turn to service as we seek to replace love of self with a greater love of God and love of neighbor. May we embrace hardship as a tool of God to grow our faith and turn our hearts from false idols. May we look forward to our future hope when we will be made more like Christ and where the presence of God awaits us in heaven.

Change is a process. Call out for faith and repentance every day. Look to Christ as the treasure of greatest worth. Confront yourself with the gospel continually. Pray that God will work in you complete joy and satisfaction in Him.

While we have a part to play in change, ultimately it is a miraculous change in our hearts that is worked by Christ. Surrender anew to Him today. Lay before Him your areas of needed change and trust Him to bring about His finished work in you.

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:14-19)