

Stages of Change

Life constantly deals with changes. Sometimes the change is hardly noticeable and we deal with it routinely, almost out of habit. For example, when you are sitting in a group and the person in front of you shifts positions making it difficult for you to see around them, you may have to shift positions. It's one of the small changes of life.

Other changes are very large like the death of a loved one, embarking on a new career, having major surgery or receiving an inheritance. These things reorder our whole lives. There are good changes, like getting a promotion or receiving a raise at work, having a baby, an improvement in health or the good changes when Jesus Christ brings us to himself and we are changed from the inside to the out. Then there are the things that we would deem to be bad changes: sickness; disability; loss of a job; fire or theft.

Studies show that all changes bring stress. You may have seen scales that assign points to the different changes we experience in life—things like Christmas, getting a speeding ticket, being approved for a mortgage, paying off a mortgage, bankruptcy or moving to a new community. Whether good or bad, those kinds of changes in life add up to stress points and, if you get enough of them, they affect not only the way you think and your attitude but they also affect the way you feel, your health.

Most of the changes we deal with in life are handled by habits that we have developed or that our parents and society have built into us. Otherwise, we couldn't deal with all the changes. So out of habit we put on warm clothing when we get cold or put on summer clothing when we're hot. We may have a route we usually take to work but if there is road work going on or an accident blocking traffic then we take an alternate route. These are shifts we regularly cope with.

The greatest adaptation takes place when something comes along and we don't have a way to cope with it. Those who move to another country may discover that things that were handled by

routine can be very difficult when you don't have a habit system to deal with it.

When habits are strong and change is necessary it can be very painful. It is difficult for a person who is used to dealing with health to have to learn to deal with illness. We have habits to deal with school or work or neighborhood or church and when others bring changes to those contexts and we need to develop new habits we may find that very difficult. For some people the difficulty is almost impossible.

Very few major changes are instant. Change typically is a process that takes place over a period of time. And even if it does come in an instant, such as a telephone call with shocking news, for most of us there are stages of change in order to get from where we were to where we're going to be.

The most famous listing of changes is the stages of dying found in the book entitled *On Death and Dying* by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. In this book she lists five stages of moving toward the acceptance of death. Not everyone goes through every stage but all go through stages.

The first stage is denial. It's the typical reaction of a patient who is discovered to be terminally ill.

The second stage is rage and anger. In this stage the patient resents the fact that others remain

healthy and alive while he or she must die. Kubler-Ross explains that God is very often the target of that anger and rage since he is perceived as being the one who has the ultimate control and may be arbitrarily inflicting death upon one person but not inflicting it upon another.

A third stage in dealing with the great change of death is bargaining. It is a time of trying to bargain with God for another week or month or year of life. All kinds of promises are made to try and be better and different. All these changes in behavior are promised although what they promise is totally irrelevant because they don't keep their promises.

Change typically is a process that takes place over a period of time.

The fourth stage is depression. It acknowledges the fact that death is immanent but there is mourning for past losses and things not done and wrongs committed. It's a time of getting ready for the arrival of death.

And then there is a fifth stage which is acceptance. It is not a happy stage but it is not an unhappy stage either. It is a time of insight. It's a valuable tool for understanding why a patient is dying and how that patient is to face death.

It seems to me that if there is a list of the stages leading to death there should be a list of stages that apply to all of the changes of life, whether they are the difficult ones or the delightful ones. So let me suggest a few.

In one form or another we go through most, if not all, of these four stages in any transition we make when we face change. The first I would call "the old". Some would say that's merely the launching platform from which the change occurs. It's the way we are now. Or, it is the way we were before the change hit us. It may be good or bad. But the point is that we are familiar with the old; we have learned to live with it. Even if the old is filled with pain, problems and sins, we know it and we do not know the new.

Sometimes when prisoners who have spent most of their lives in a penitentiary are released, they are reluctant to go to the outside world. It's changed so much that they can't cope with it. In fact, they may actually go out and commit another crime so that they can return to prison and the familiar.

The old is the first stage in any process of change. The second stage is the reality. It is the way things could be or the way things will be. It is seeing the change and seeing me in the change. Psychologists sometimes refer to psychological conversion. It's when you couldn't see something but now you can see it. For example, if you look at a pattern of bricks you may just see straight lines, but then after awhile a pattern emerges. Psychological conversion has taken place. After that, when you look at those same bricks it is almost impossible not to see the pattern because you have shifted your perception of reality.

So it is when we look at reality and we see it. We may not fully accept it, but we see that the change affects us and that we are part of it. Change may be imposed or it may be simply a possibility. Imposed change could be something as difficult

as someone leaving you a million dollars and you have to face it. Or, it may be far more unpleasant. It may be an unwelcome diagnosis that you didn't want or a divorce that you hate to have happen.

Or, it may not be something imposed by someone else that has to happen and you see that reality. Perhaps it's conversion to Jesus Christ. I've often talked with people who are not Christians and explained to them what it means to be a Christian, but until they see for themselves the possibility of the change it is unlikely that they will come to the Savior.

It may be the possibility of a new job. Or, it may be the possibility of suicide. It is the possibility of doing something we have a choice of as far as the change is concerned. When that stage of reality comes we see ourselves or our church or our family the way we will be or could be. We may see a new church building or the birth of a child or a new job or any of the changes that continually affect us. But we need to see ourselves in that reality before we come to terms with that change.

Sometimes change is gradual like seeing ourselves as older. Sometimes it's a matter of seeing ourselves as married or divorced or seeing ourselves in a different job. It is stepping out of the old into the second stage of the reality.

The third stage is the response. It is how we respond to change, either change that is inflicted on us or change that is a possibility. There are two choices in the response stage: resistance or reception. Resistance is fighting back and possibly rejecting change. It's believing you will lick the disease no matter what the physician says. It's refusing to accept that the divorce will really happen. Or, it is being convinced that the car will continue to run no matter what condition it's in. It is trying to keep the old. It's trying to keep things the way they are, sometimes at an extraordinary price.

Or, there may be reception to that change. It may be pursuing it or at least accepting it. It is choosing to move out of the old and into the new. We have to make decisions. We have to decide if we are willing to use the resources that we have in time and money and energy and relationships to resist or receive the change. Some people, in fact, spend all their lives resisting changes that are irresistible.

It can be tragic when a person has a great problem and simply will not accept it. For the rest of

life all the energy, time, money and relationships are spent until nothing is left rather than coming to terms with the change that is theirs.

How we respond is determined by our beliefs. That is where Christians are distinct. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13 we are told that Christians don't "grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope." When Christians lose loved ones or receive terminal diagnoses we are the same as non-Christians. We are leaving the old. We face the reality. We grieve, but our grief is different. We always have hope.

Christians constantly respond to poverty or wealth, sickness and health, getting children and losing children, single-ness or married-ness, being a male or female—all of the realities of life. But we respond Christianly.

The fourth and final stage of change is difference. You could call it "the new." Or, call it the new old. It is the new launching platform for further changes that may come later. Whenever we respond to change we in turn are changed. We are different. Aging makes us different. So do prosperity, problems, pain and pleasure. Every change in life makes us different persons.

How we respond to those changes determines if different is better or worse, if we're weaker or stronger, more like Christ or less like Christ.

I leave you with a comparison to Jesus Christ and invite you to what has to be one of the strangest groups of verses in the entire Bible. Hebrews 10:5-7 is a record of the words that the Son of God spoke when he left heaven to come to earth.

Jesus offers his help to us in the changes of life—good and bad; great and small.

I assume this to be in the final moments before the incarnation and the conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary took place:

"Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God.'"

In the old he was spirit in heaven. The reality is the incarnation. He became human and came to earth. The response was to do the Father's will, no matter what the cost. The difference is that he is the God/Man, or Savior, our Lord, our Jesus.

Put that all together. The change through which he went means that Jesus knows our changes. In Hebrews 2:18 we are told, "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." Your translation of the Bible might use the word tested instead of tempted, but I think we could just as legitimately say changed. He is able

to help those who are being changed because he has gone through the same changes that we face. He has gone through a change far greater than anything that we could ever experience. And he did it successfully. Jesus offers his help to us in the changes of life—good and bad; great and small.

Finally, add to these verses the familiar words in Matthew 28:20 when Jesus said, ". . . surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." No matter how long it takes, no matter how many the changes are, the guarantee is that Jesus Christ who has gone through the greatest change understands all of our changes and has offered us his help. He is with us forever.

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
©Leith Anderson

