

Coping with Change

If I live to be 90 I'm more than half-way there. That makes me less experienced in life than many but more experienced than most. My experiences in life are more than most people's but they do not match many others' in terms of years lived. They are far short of the experiences my parents had living through most of the 20th century. But I have seen a lot of changes and I have tried to be a keen observer of them.

I've seen seemingly magnificent marriages torn apart by infidelity. A friend I was sure would die soon was restored to wonderful health. One of the richest men I have ever known lost just about everything he had. I have seen astounding churches emerge from nothing; I have also seen some great churches crumble down to nothing. I've been there when people have faced death and died—some with peace and some with fear. I have witnessed the power of Jesus Christ transform pathetic sinners into godly saints. Yes, I've seen lots of changes and I've seen many different ways people have tried to cope with the constant changes around them. It is from these that I have tried to learn some lessons on coping with change.

Six of the greatest lessons on coping with change come from the stories of two Bible characters—one very well-known and one barely known at all.

The story of Mary is one of the most familiar in the Bible but it is seldom told outside of the Christmas season. It is the story of an obscure teenage Jewish girl who was catapulted into universal fame. Not by her choice she faced some of the greatest changes possible. And she survived. She more than survived. Mary became a sterling model of how to cope with change. Her story is found in Luke 1:26-45:

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

The angel appeared. The announcement was made. I'm sure the angel was thrilled with the privilege of announcing the best news ever. All of heaven was watching with anticipation. But Mary

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didn't know it was coming. And her response was as human and normal as could be.

"*Mary was greatly troubled.*" Troubled is a good word. It incorporates wonder and awe and fear and doubt all at once. It is a standard first response to great change in our lives.

Mary was silent at first. When she finally spoke it was not in celebration, acceptance or rejection. She responded with a simple question: "*How will this be?*" The change simply didn't make sense to her. While she didn't have a degree in human biology she knew that virgins don't have babies; so she asked how.

Her example is a lesson to us. When big changes come our way—from the swift currents of society to the subtle changes in our bodies—it's okay to be troubled; it's okay to ask questions. When faced with opportunities beyond our dreams or disappointments beyond our nightmares it is no affront to faith if we respond with wonder and awe and doubt all at once. There is nothing wrong with asking God why and how. There is nothing wrong with being troubled by change.

When Mary heard the angel say "*nothing is impossible with God*" she recognized that the changes she was facing were beyond her understanding. No way could she fully understand the incarnation, the virgin conception, the coming death and resurrection. She was a simple peasant girl. But, even the best educated theologians are hard pressed to understand all that happened.

Mary couldn't understand it all, but she knew she could believe and trust God. So, she coped with change based on her understanding of God, not her understanding of the situation. In that I find our second lesson from her. For sooner or later we all face changes we did not choose and can't understand. Never can we get all the facts. Even if we could we probably couldn't put them all together. Coping with change requires confidence that God knows and God can be trusted. God has ultimate good planned which is sometimes very hard to figure out. So we do what Mary did—we trust him and say, "*I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you say.*"

As soon as the angel left, Luke tells us: "*At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.*" Mary faced great change. She was under enormous

stress. And the first thing she did was get support from a friend.

Mary might have done otherwise. She could have been embarrassed by the intimacy of her change. She could have kept it a secret and tried to handle it alone. She could have isolated herself from others. But Mary did none of these things. Rather, she connected with others.

This is good advice for us when we face change. Resist the temptation to handle the situation alone. Avoid isolation. In the midst of change is precisely when we need others. Not that everyone needs to be told everything. But we should all seek the help and support of select persons who will help get us through.

Unfortunately, already isolated people tend to isolate more when faced with changes, especially painful changes. This multiplies their problems. So, even if it is hard—talk to others; get counsel; join a support group; visit friends. Connect with others and don't isolate.

Less well known than Mary was a man named Gamaliel. He was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the ancient religious ruling body of Judaism. It was during the emergence and rapid growth of the early Christian church. The apostles were fired up by the recent resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit. Thousands of Jews were becoming Christians. The Jewish leaders faced enormous changes that they did not understand, just as Christians were facing enormous changes they didn't understand. The story that surrounds Gamaliel gives us more good lessons for coping with change in Acts 5:17-42:

Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life."

At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.

Then the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. But on arriving at the jail, the

officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this.

Then someone came and said, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.” At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.

Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.

When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed them: “Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do

to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in

the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

The first lesson from Gamaliel in how to cope with change is to obey God rather than men. Flexibility and adaptability are often good characteristics to have in an era of great change. Many would counsel us today to “go with the flow” in order to cope. Often that is good advice, but not always. There are times when it is necessary to take a stand and fight against the flow of change. That’s what courageous men and women did in Eastern Europe. Eventually it paid off and communism began to crumble.

In our society the flow of change is increasingly secular. Tolerance of every view and lifestyle is the mood of the day. Acceptance has been raised to the highest virtue. For Christians, many changes have been repulsive. An incomplete list includes abortion-on-demand, widespread substance abuse, approval of homosexual lifestyles and other changes contrary to the Bible. In such changes,

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flexibility is no virtue. We must do what Peter and the other apostles did. We must obey God rather than men!

One of the best of ways to cope with change is to have standards to help us distinguish when we should go along with change and when we must stand against change. Our standard is God and his Bible. When God speaks we must do what he says even if the cost is very high.

From Gamaliel's story comes a second lesson for coping with change. It is to have confidence in God's sovereignty. As the seventy members of the Sanhedrin deliberated the fate of the apostles, Gamaliel made a most memorable statement when he said in Acts 5:38-39: ". . . if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

When Gamaliel faced disturbing changes he had great confidence in God's sovereignty. He did not feel ultimately responsible for the outcome of everything that happened. He believed God was strong and operative in every situation.

I need to remember that in order to cope with change. When my community is changing and my culture is shifting and there are daily challenges in my church and family and body, I need to remember that everything is not my responsibility. I am responsible to God but I am not responsible to shape the world. God is sovereign; he will prevail. What he wants will happen.

We need to take things seriously, but not quite so seriously that we take upon ourselves responsibilities that are not ours. Like Gamaliel, we need to have confidence in God and in his sovereignty.

Finally, from Gamaliel's story we learn to live for Jesus in every situation. There is a wonderful response to change reported in Acts 5:41: "*The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*" Earlier in this story they had been set free from jail by an angel. That was worth rejoicing. Later they were flogged and no angel came. But they still rejoiced. They rejoiced because they had been counted worthy to suffer disgrace for the Name of Jesus. In other words, these early Christians faced good changes and bad changes with the same basic response—they lived for Jesus Christ. What was most important to them was not being comfortable or uncomfortable, successful or unsuccessful, alive or dead. What was most important was living Christianly no matter what happened.

This is a powerful way to live, but one Americans have resisted. We want life to be easy. We always prefer angels getting us out of tough scrapes. We never want to be disgraced and we certainly don't want to be flogged! As Christians, let us not strive for the easy way but for the Christian way. Let us cope with change, not by wanting every circumstance to be good, but by using every experience—good or bad, pleasure or pain, triumph or defeat—to show how Christians respond to each.

These stories are old and our stories are new because we face change every day. These principles may sound like theory, but the situations these people faced were real. The people were real. What they experienced really happened. Let us remember that we have the same God! While the situations may change, our God does not. He still gives all the resources we need to cope with change and to be like Mary and Gamaliel in the 21st century.

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