

TRANSITIONS AND TRADITIONS

by
Gaspar Colon
Co-Director, Family Ministries
Euro-Asia Division
1994

Theme: Dramatic changes in the lives of God's people were often marked by celebrations. These celebrations frequently became traditions that kept memories alive and helped change to be viewed positively as part of growth and progress toward God's goals for His people.

Theme Text: Leviticus 23:1,2; Luke 22:19

Presentation Notes: Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses (1), (2), (3) are used to indicate items from the section called *Sermon Illumination*, which may be used for illustration. The addition of your personal illustrations will enhance the presentation.

As his muscles strain to get a better grip on the Stranger who is wrestling him to the ground, Jacob's mind whirls to make sense of his plight. Who is this intruder who has approached him in the night? Could it be someone sent by his brother Esau to detain him or slay him? Instead of answers Jacob experiences the force of one mightier than he. He senses that this powerful visitor is more than a thief in the night, more than one sent to stop him on his journey. But, what if he's wrong? He must fight on. He must hold out until the light of dawn. He must!

With the first rays of the sun glinting off the nearby hills the Stranger quickly ends the stalemate. Enveloped in the agony of pain and defeat, Jacob holds on to the Stranger who says, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replies, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

Before blessing him, the Stranger changes Jacob's name from "heel grabber" to "struggler with God" (Israel). The battle is over. As the sun rises in the sky, the man who is now named Israel stands overwhelmed with what has just happened. He has encountered God face to face and lived. The deceiver has wrestled with God and has come away blessed, renamed, and made ready to face his brother Esau.

The limping patriarch builds there a lasting altar to the memory of this change point in his life. From now on the place will be called Peniel, "Face of God," because there he met God face to face. In years to come Israel will tell his children about this. He will bring them here. He will even have them stop here whenever they are near. Why? Because he wants to remember this period of dramatic change. He wants his children to remember God's victory in his life (See Genesis 32:22-32).

Relating to Change

How does one nurture faith while immersed in a changing world? What attitude shall we take toward change? Are changes disruptions to be avoided in the journey of life? Should we try to eliminate change as much as possible? The fact is that change is unavoidable.

Growth causes change. We never seem to outgrow the movements of life that bring change in their train; change which may baffle, irritate, or frighten us.

Unfulfilled expectations cause change. Our fears may begin early in life, when our concepts about life are being shaped. We try to answer questions like: "What kind of person will I be?" or "What will I do when I grow up?" or "Whom will I marry?" or "How rich and famous will I be?" We create idealistic expectations based on fantasies of what we think our lives should be like. Often, as we grow up, the ideal expectations that we have so carefully constructed clash with the cold realities of our limits and our circumstances, and we are sadly disillusioned. (1)

Change brings challenges. While change can unsettle us and create uncertainty and fear, it can also provide occasion for personal development as we rise to its challenges. Change challenges us to consider:

- *That we do not walk alone.* We walk through change with a changeless loving God. We wrestle with Him face to face, witness His strength, and are affirmed by Him as we prepare to face the unknown.
- *That we need to remember.* We can celebrate change by establishing meaningful landmark traditions that perpetuate the lessons learned, aid us in sharing these lessons with the next generation, and strengthen our trust in the changeless Friend who accompanies us through change.
- *That we need to update our faith resources* to meet our new roles.

The Exodus—Israel's great experience with change. Nearly 400 years after Joseph brought his family to Egypt, the children of Israel found themselves enslaved. Repeated warnings and consequent plagues did not convince Egypt's ruler to heed God's demand that His people be freed. On their final night in Egypt, the destroying angel took the life of the firstborn in every Egyptian family. Among the Israelites, however, there was salvation provided from this plague. A final warning from God was given, "your first-born will die, unless you present the blood of a lamb on the sides and on the tops of the door frames of your home." Each family was to solemnly eat of the prescribed meal and be ready to claim their freedom with cloaks tucked under their belts, their sandals on, and everything in readiness for the march to freedom.

This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord—a lasting ordinance. . . . Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. . . . Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as He promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when He struck down the Egyptians.' Then the people bowed down and worshiped" (Ex. 12:14, 17, 24-27, NIV)

Traumatic as it was, this great change in the life of the nation was for the better. God was with them in this change. They were to commemorate it, and build their faith for their future upon this great act of God in their past. Tragically, when confronted by obstacles, attacks, and adversity, they found themselves grumbling at their dashed expectations of a smooth transition to the promised land. Having forgotten what God had intended the traditional celebrations to produce in them, they wandered in the wilderness until a new generation took God at His word and finally inherited the longed-for land of promise.

Facing Change With a Changeless Companion

The ever-present I AM. When Moses was called by God to lead His people out of captivity, he wanted to know God's name. Moses wanted to identify the One who had sent him. He wanted to

share the principle characteristic of the sovereign Lord who was calling His people to a new land, to different circumstances, to the fearful responsibilities that come with freedom. God responded, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14, NIV).

"I AM" is always in the present. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it this way: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (13:8, NIV). (2)

|The abiding Comforter. When feelings of insecurity filled the disciples at His impending departure, Jesus assured them, "I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever" (John 14:17, KJV).

|"I am with you always." Even as Jesus bade them farewell and commissioned them to their work of teaching all nations and baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, He assured them with the words: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20, NIV). (3)

Regardless of the changes in your life, in your family, in the challenges that you face today, there is one who is not ruffled by the storm, in whose loving arms you can find peace and rest and an understanding heart. To you He says, "Don't be afraid, I AM with you."

Multiplied Transitions and Meaningful Traditions

The Bible is a collection of the stories of God's people in transition. God's people are always facing change.

- Eve and Adam had to adjust to a new home away from the protective, life-giving garden that they had always known.
- Noah was confronted by the destruction of the world as he knew it and witnessed a new beginning.
- Abram and Sarai left their well-established home in the city of Ur for the promise of a new life, a new land, and a legacy to a new generation, which seemed impossible.
- Jacob suffered the guilt of his own trickery as well as the deception of his father-in-law and his sons.
- Joseph was transformed from a rejected sibling sold as a slave to a mighty ruler in Egypt.
- Hadassah went from orphan girl under the care of her cousin Mordecai to become Esther, Queen of Persia and Media.
- Pastor Hosea nurtured his illegitimate family while seeking out his wayward wife to buy her back from her pimps.
- Peter, the outspoken, brash fisherman, became a respected apostle and key leader in the early Church.
- Saul the persecutor became Paul the captive of Christ, taking the Gospel to the Gentiles, and leaving behind him a substantial legacy in Scripture.

In many, if not most of these transitions, when He felt it was important for His people to remember important lessons, God instituted a celebration of the event or experience. These celebrations were to be repeated on anniversaries or otherwise cyclical patterns to keep alive the experience and the blessing. Often a child would ask her parents, "Why are we doing this?" and the opportunity would arise to re-tell the story; to re-live the event; to contextualize the historic. The Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Booths; each were reminders of specific aspects of God's intervention on behalf of His people. (4) These celebrations were to keep God's people focused and invested in God's plan for them, but unfortunately these sometimes turned into mere ritual and lost their meaning. The result was a lifeless series of things to do that impeded rather than enhanced their spiritual growth.

In His teaching, Jesus sought to bring back to the consciousness of His followers a clearer understanding of the message of restoration, which is at the core of the gospel. He transformed the Passover celebration of freedom and independence to a solemn invitation for His people to make room for the Word to become a part of our flesh and blood; a declaration of total dependence on God. To nurture faith among the members of our families and our church community, it is important to celebrate meaningfully, to establish landmark events that remind us and keep us focused in our walk to the promised land. (5)

Facing the Challenge of New Roles

A baby is dependent on his parents for everything until he learns how to crawl and walk. Then a new world of opportunity and responsibility opens up to him. The interaction between parent and child changes to include issues such as where it is safe to go and where it is not. What can the child touch, what should he not?

. . . A child leaves the intimate security of home to face her first day of school in which she will interact more formally with a wider circle of influences.

. . . A young man seals his commitment to Jesus in baptism and becomes a part of the active, ministering body of Christ.

. . . A couple voice their wedding vows and launch out together to meet the challenge of creating a home and affecting society through it.

. . . The factory worker retires and strives to feel useful at home and in his community.

. . . The new widow faces the dark chasm of loneliness while she tries hard not to be a burden on others.

Change is here to stay. It is normal. It provides for each of us an opportunity to reach beyond our limits and develop faith and other resources to cope with the new roles that we inherit as we move through the stages of life.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians: ". . . I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:11-13, NIV).

Conclusion

Change in life is inevitable. How we face and work through the changes that come are important to our well-being. When facing change:

Remember you do not walk alone. You may walk through change with a changeless, loving God. At times it may seem as if we are wrestling with Him as did Jacob. But also like Jacob, we witness His strength, and are affirmed by Him as we prepare to face the unknown.

Celebrate the lessons learned from change. Establish meaningful landmark traditions that perpetuate the lessons learned and that will aid you in sharing these lessons with the next generation, strengthening our trust in the changeless Friend who accompanies us through change.

Learn from change. Update your faith resources; try to look for positive ways in which you can stretch and grow.

"And as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel: but the LORD thundered with a great thunder on that day upon the Philistines, and discomfited them; and they were smitten before Israel. And the men of Israel went out of Mizpeh, and pursued the Philistines, and smote them, until they came under Bethcar. Then Samuel took a

stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, Hitherto hath the LORD helped us" (1 Samuel 7:10-12, KJV).

. . . Let us look to the monumental pillars, reminders of what the Lord has done to comfort us and to save us from the hand of the destroyer. Let us keep fresh in our memory all the tender mercies that God has shown us,—the tears He has wiped away, the pains He has soothed, the anxieties removed, the fears dispelled, the wants supplied, the blessings bestowed,—thus strengthening ourselves for all that is before us through the remainder of our pilgrimage.

We cannot but look forward to new perplexities in the coming conflict, but we may look on what is past as well as on what is to come, and say, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us [1 Samuel 7:12]. 'As thy days, so shall thy strength be.'" Deuteronomy 33:25. The trial will not exceed the strength that shall be given us to bear it. Then let us take up our work just where we find it, believing that whatever may come, strength proportionate to the trial [or changepoint] will be given (E. G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 125).

Sermon Illumination

One (1): Change Points. "The circumstances of our lives put us in contact with points of change, and just when we feel we are freed from one particular changepoint, crisis, transition, or stage of life—pow! We are off into another one. Changepoints are here to stay.

"The little girl can't wait to grow up so she can be a 'boss' like Mommy.

"The teenage girl fantasizes about having clear, beautiful skin and what kind of a man she'll love.

"The young wife and new mother longs for the time when her baby will sleep the whole night through.

"The wife of a military man dreams of OWNING a home, wallpapering it, and staying in it until the cow jumps over the moon.

"The couple without children wonders if having or adopting a child would bring a lasting happiness to their marriage.

"The mother of two teenagers hopes the old adage 'this too shall pass' will come true.

"The woman whose children have grown and left home can't define exactly what's wrong with her—only that this time in her life isn't as she expected it to be.

"The newly divorced or widowed woman suddenly finds herself experiencing the highly praised freedom she's heard about, but now that she has it, it's a lonely kind of freedom and she doesn't have a clue as to how to develop or use it.

"The woman who goes through the hormonal changes of menopause wakes up one morning to find the cold fear of growing old heavily upon her. She questions whether God has more in store for her or if this is all there is.

"What we all forget in every phase of our lives is that *life* is a whole *series* of changepoints" (Joyce Landorf, *Changepoints*, pp. 12-13).

Two (2): Reference Points. Some years ago, one of the leading Adventist Choirs in New York City was performing a concert at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The music hall was filled to capacity for this long-expected event. All was going well. The choir was in top form. The director was leading the group flawlessly through the well-rehearsed pieces that had made this choir famous. Near the end of the program, during the most complex portion of the climax of the performance, someone opened the stage door near the pianist who was accompanying the group. A gust of wind sent the pianist's musical score flying across the stage. Attempting to recall the rest of the score from memory, the pianist continued to play, but something was wrong. In the frenzy of the moment, the pianist had inadvertently changed keys.

The choir lost its bearings in the complicated interplay of parts and stopped in dead silence. Instantly the choir director raised a finger and pointed to the lead soprano who softly hummed a middle C (do), the director quickly whispered the reference point from which to start, and in a split second the well-practiced choir had continued *a capella*. The pianist quickly retrieved his music and joined in. At the end of the piece the audience applauded the group for its instant recovery from a disastrous situation. As the audience applauded the director pointed to the lead soprano. Her perfect pitch had saved the performance. The single changeless note had given everyone in the group their bearings so that they could continue the piece instantly and without much fuss. God is like that. When our situation gets chaotic and the reference points are blurred, He provides us with the changeless reference point (His Word) that we need to finish the task.

Three (3): Jesus, the calm in the tempest. See Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; or Luke 8:22-25.

Four (4): Textual Background. See Deuteronomy 8:2-18.

Five (5): Personal Experience. Share some of the ways your family celebrates special spiritual milestones such as baptisms, baptismal anniversaries, communion, etc.

References

Landorf, J. (1981). *Changepoints*. Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company.

White, E. G. (1977). *Steps to Christ*. Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald Publishing Association.