

Is God routinely making necessary change in your life...? Is it normal that he shows you change that He wants... and you are allowing it...? If so... how does He do it...? Are you as open as you need to be to the change He tries to make...?

John Maxwell teaches:

"When it comes to change, there are three seasons of timing: People change when they hurt enough that they have to, when they learn enough that they want to, and when they receive enough that they are able to."

When I first saw that... his first season stuck out to me. "*People change when they hurt enough that they have to...*" I thought... yeah... that is pretty basic... Maxwell seems to make a lot of sense. ... That is when we all would change – whenever we become discomforted enough...

However... there has been some significant medical research that doesn't appear to bear this out - as a consistent truth... when it comes our health.

One of these studies was done in 2006. It showed that nearly 600,000 people have heart bypasses every year in America. These people are told after their bypasses that they must change their lifestyle. The heart bypass is a temporary fix. They must change their diet. They must quit smoking and drinking. They must exercise and reduce stress.

In essence, the doctors say, "Change or die."

You would think that a near-death experience would forever grab the attention of the patients. John Maxwell's observation that people change when they hurt enough that they have to... we might think would prevail in a

clear majority of the 600,000 heart bypasses that are performed each year. Sadly... however this just isn't the case.

Ninety percent of the heart patients do not change. They remain the same, living the status quo. Study after study indicates that two years after heart surgery... these heart surgery patients do not alter their behavior.

But let's go back to what John Maxwell declared. He proposed **three** seasons of change. ... Seasons two and three are: 2) *when they learn enough that they want to...* and 3) *when they receive enough that they are able to.*" Did you notice that Maxwell did not call them "**R**asons for change"... but instead... he is referring to "**S**asons of change..." ... A mature individual has a different process for making change... than a person who has not matured beyond that initial season. ... Seasons two and three better reflect the way God produces permanent change in believer's lives.

We can observe seasons 2 and 3 in a story by a pastor from Washington D.C. Pastor Craig Barnes related the following:

When I was a child, my minister father brought home a 12-year-old boy named Roger, whose parents had died from a drug overdose. There was no one to care for Roger, so my folks decided they'd just raise him as if he were one of their own sons.

At first it was quite difficult for Roger to adjust to his new home—an environment free of heroine-addicted adults! Every day, several times a day, I heard my parents saying to Roger:

"No, no. That's not how we behave in this family."

"No, no. You don't have to scream or fight or hurt other people to get what you want."

"No, no, Roger, we expect you to show respect in this family." And in time Roger began to change.

Now, did Roger have to make all those changes in order to become a part of the family? No. He was made a part of the family simply by the grace of my father. But did he then have to do a lot of hard work because he was in the family? You bet he did. It was tough for him to change, and he had to work at it. But he was motivated by gratitude for the incredible love he had received.

Do you have a lot of hard work to do now that the Spirit has adopted you into God's family? Certainly. But not in order to become a son or a daughter of the heavenly Father. No, you make those changes because you are a son or daughter. And every time you start to revert back to the old addictions to sin, the Holy Spirit will say to you, "No, no. That's not how we act in this family."

Believer... change is tough... isn't it...? We have to work at it. ... But significant and permanent change in us... is motivated by gratitude for the incredible love we have received from our Heavenly Father.

Our passage of study this morning brings our attention front and center to the topic of how God brings needed change in our lives. ... LISTEN... God did not provide you with salvation... only for you to sit on the sidelines. ... Every one of us... must pay careful attention to the **what** and the **how** ... of God making change in our lives – and if you are a believer... He certainly is trying to bring change inside you. ... If you do not sense God's continuous work of change in your life... then you should check your spiritual pulse... because the chances are that you are probably... still in the condition of spiritual deadness... (Dead to the things of God.)

Philippians 1:6 (ESV)

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Last week we started the narrative in Acts chapter 10... where God was making a very difficult change in the Apostle Peter... and also in the very young Christian movement. Peter... who was filled with the Holy Spirit... was struggling with a deeply rooted religious and racial prejudice.

Peter... of course was Jewish and the Jews hated the Romans... because they had to live under an occupying army... pay taxes to Caesar... carry their bags if commanded... suffer cruel treatment daily... fight continually to keep their temple and Jerusalem free of Roman idols and symbols... and watch many of their brothers suffer the cruel punishment of being publicly beaten and crucified. ... The Jews looked on the Romans as less than animals... and so unclean that if they touched one in the street they would be considered unclean themselves and would have to rush home and wash. ... And no Jew would ever be found in the home of a Gentile... let alone a Roman soldier. Nor would a Jew be found praying with Gentiles in the temple because of the "middle wall of partition"; Gentiles faced the threat of death if they sought to cross it in order to enter the Jewish section.

But on the other side of the coin... the Romans couldn't stand the arrogant Jews and their religious sensitivity... their religious laws... and the crowds at the times of the feasts in Jerusalem which could turn into a riot in a minute.

So in the midst of this tense social and religious climate... two natural enemies (Peter and a Roman Centurion) were about to meet.

God had already been working on Peter. ... He was confronting Peter with his prejudice... because Peter had bound-up all the people groups of the world (except for his own race) into one loathsome bundle.

God waited until Peter was hungry... and while lunch was being prepared for him... He placed Peter into a trance and gave him a vision of a sheet being lowered from Heaven. The sheet was full of animals that Jews could not eat. It was a repulsive smorgasbord to Peter. God said, "Take and eat, Peter." ... Peter refused God's instruction... calling them common and unclean. God told Peter that he was not to call anything unclean – that God had made clean.

Peter was confused. Just then... messengers arrived... having been sent by Cornelius... a Roman centurion. ... Cornelius had been prompted by God to send for Peter to come and speak with him.

This is where we pick up the action... of today's passage.

Acts 10:23-43

Our opening verse... (Acts 10:23)... contains two principles that we should notice... about the way God makes effective change in us. The first one looks insignificant and would be easy to miss... if we don't stop and put our feet in Peter's sandals for just a moment. Peter invited these Gentile messengers from Cornelius into the home to spend the night – and they did!

This may not seem very horrific to you and I – being so far removed from this scene... but such action was expressly forbidden in all the rabbinical writings. ... No self-respecting Jew would ever consider doing such a thing. This was just common sense in Peter's day... that you do not play host to Gentiles in your place of residence. When Peter invited them in to be his guests... and they stayed the whole night... this would have sent shock waves among all the Jews... even the Jewish believers in Jesus. ... This

was a radical thing that happened here. But God was in it. God was leading Peter.

So let me point out something very important about the way God brings change to our lives. PRINCIPLE NUMBER ONE... (Here it is...) Change that God will bring... always involves risk. You can count on it!

Sometimes believers consider the risk involved and automatically assume that God must not be leading us to that change... because of the risk. ... Have you ever sensed that God was leading you make a change in your life... but you shied away... simply because of the risk factor...? Maybe you worried – “*What will my friends think...?*”

Good business practice... is all about minimizing risk. Those who run a business have to keep a careful eye on their risks and try to eliminate any or all of them. That is fine... it is the “name of the game” that every successful business must follow – especially as they start out. ... But it is not fine to assume that the same is true for discovering what change God is effecting in our life. Spiritual change always involves risk... because it is a matter of faith.

2 Corinthians 5:7 (ESV)

for we walk by faith, not by sight.

Acts 10:23b

Peter brought along several Christian brothers with him. They would later prove invaluable to Peter. They were about to witness the Holy Spirit descending on Gentiles – for the very first time... ever! ... Now – next week when we come to chapter 11... The Folks back in Jerusalem will be pretty

perturbed... once they get wind of it. But these other witnesses... alongside of Peter will be able to testify that this was... indeed a work of God. It was a significant change. God was turning a page in human history – Christianity was being shown that it was for Gentiles too!

Herein lies our second principle for the way God makes change in our life. **PRINCIPLE NUMBER TWO** – God’s change is often aided by human witnesses. It is good when we create witnesses to the change God is making. Here is what I mean by that... You will dramatically increase the likelihood of effective change... by telling others about it. Wherever God is at work in you – tell others about it! Don’t hide it. Contrary to what some try to make it... Christianity is not a private religion. Involve others if you want successful transformation. It will certainly make you vulnerable... but that just brings us back to principle number one. “Change always involves risk.”

Acts 10:24-27

Cornelius’ response was astounding! Here we have an elite Roman military commander... leader of the world’s crack commando unit)... who was trained to bow to **NO FOREIGNER** – especially to a Jew... who they thought were arrogant people anyway. ... But this Roman commander **bows** before this Galilean fisherman!

This was the perfect opportunity for Peter to put his prejudice back into high gear. ... “Yes... *bow before me... you Gentile Dog! I am one of God’s chosen people... One to whom the Messiah has given the keys to the Kingdom!*”

But Peter doesn’t do that. He refused to be worshipped at all.

As a side note... this little incident here has been cited by Protestants to Catholics down through the centuries... pointing out that Catholicism's very first Pope... (unlike every other Pope) – refused worship! “Stand-up...” He said... “I too am just a man...”

Peter had no elevated sense of himself and did not go down that road when he was given the perfect opportunity. I think that Peter was being tested... and he passed this one. ... (Now later... when Paul visits Peter and brings some Gentiles with him... Peter will revert back to his prejudice and will not eat with the Gentile believers... who were friends of Paul. But for now... he passed the test.)

The “Author and Perfector of our Faith” – sometimes places you and I in situations (and they usually seem to come right after a major lesson or commitment that we make to God) in order to strengthen our level of commitment. These are tests that show us what that level is. They are encouraging when we pass... and valuable schoolings when we fail.

If you have recently learned an important Spiritual principle... or made a serious commitment – expect a test! This is not to make you fall... It is to strengthen your resolve... and to make you secure in it.

This brings us to PRINCIPLE NUMBER THREE. Once you commit to the change that God is making in your life – expect to be tested.

Now... let's take a look at the other side of the coin in this story. Peter wasn't the only person in whom God was effecting change. ... God was also changing Cornelius. Can we see these same principles at work with Cornelius...? ... The answer is “Yes.”

Cornelius took tremendous risk... he too was tested... and he had gathered his house full of witnesses for the change that was about to take place with Peter's message.

Cornelius could very easily have taken the position that said – “Since I am a Roman centurion... I can command you to present yourself anywhere that I wish... and you are obligated to obey. Therefore it is rather fitting that you... a peasant and a Galilean fisherman would come at my command...” But he didn't! And again... this is really amazing! Instead he groveled before a Jew... AND HE DID THIS IN FRONT OF HIS GATHERED FRIENDS AND FAMILY...! ... Try to imagine the risk he took in terms of his personal reputation.

As I tried to imagine it for myself I could almost hear the dialogue just before Peter showed up...

“Hey Lenny! Why don't you drop by my house right now...? I have something for you to see and hear...”

“Sure Cornelius... what is it...?”

“Well... I've got this Jew coming over from Joppa...”

“Say... whaaaat...? Have you lost your mind...? Why would I... or anyone else want to sit down in your house with a Jew...? I am sick in tired of their arrogant ways – They even snub us! We are their conquerors – and yet they try to brush us off as though they are better than us!”

“Well... I had this vision... see...”

“You had a what...?!!!

“A vision... and this vision told me to send for this guy whom I've never even heard before... named Peter... over in Joppa...”

We are not told HOW Cornelius got all of his witnesses there... but verse 27 reads that “*he*” (Peter) “*went in and found many persons gathered...*”

Acts 10:28-29

What he says is not a friendly thing to say. In fact, it is an insult. J. Vernon McGee paraphrased Peter’s introduction like this: "*If you really want to know how I felt about this, well, I just didn't want to come. I've never been in the home of a Gentile before. Never before have I gone into a place that is unclean!*" But he does go on to add, "*Even though I have never before been in an unclean home, God has told me not to call any man unclean. We are all sinners and we are all savable.*"

How would you feel, especially if you are a lady who is a housekeeper, if some visitor came into your home and his first words were, "*I am coming into your home, which I consider dirty*"? You wouldn't exactly respond with a warm, friendly feeling, would you? Yet this is the substance of what Simon Peter said.

However... Peter went on to explain the critical lesson that God was teaching him... that there are no second class people of this world... who are beyond the grace of God. Peter was being taught that it was entirely inappropriate either to worship somebody as if divine (as Cornelius had tried to do to him)... or to reject somebody as if unclean (which he would previously have done to Cornelius). ... Peter refused both to be treated as if he were a god, and to treat Cornelius as if he were a dog.'

But this still doesn't answer a few difficult questions we see in these verses. ... Like... “Why did Peter begin the way that he did?” ... Why start

by emphasizing the contentious issue of your not wanting to enter an unclean house...? Don't close the door on your opportunity before you give the Gospel to this eager audience!

And then second... Peter asks why Cornelius sent for him. It is as if Peter had not already been told about Cornelius' vision. But verse 22 shows that the messengers had already told Peter the circumstances and reason – when they came to get him in Joppa. So why does he play ignorant... as if he didn't know...?

Here is what I think was happening. Peter knew that one of the biggest changes in human history was taking place. And I think that Peter is being very careful... because of the witnesses who had accompanied him. He was establishing everything... ever so carefully... for the benefit of all the witnesses – (his **and** Cornelius') – because they had not all been privy to the experiences God had given to Peter and Cornelius. Not everyone at that meeting had come equally prepared.

You know what...? We find here another principle. ... PRINCIPLE NUMBER FOUR: Never assume that God's will is as clear to everyone as it is to you. ... Not everyone will be prepared like you have. AND – not everyone will be as open to the will of God as you are. We need to patiently communicate the understanding that God is giving to us.

Acts 10:30-33

Cornelius makes it clear to those present that he was the one who had sent for Peter. Cornelius gives due respect to Peter by affirming that Peter's coming was indeed justified and cleared of God. The group has been gathered to hear a message from Peter. Peter was aware of this fact, but it

needed to be stated plainly so that all knew the reason for the meeting and the reason why Peter would give the message he did.

Acts 10:34-43

He gave almost the same message he gave on the day of Pentecost... which we saw when we were in Acts chapter 2. It is also a concise summary of his message before the Sanhedrin that we saw in chapter three. ... And once again... Peter is telling them that God sent his Son Jesus to bring peace between God and man and between fellow men. Then he told them how Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit and went about doing good and setting people free from the oppression of the devil. He told them that Jesus then went to the Roman cross for our sins, but that God raised him from the dead. His resurrection was witnessed by those who believed he was both the Son of God and the only one willing and then able to offer anyone, Jew and Gentile alike, the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of eternal life if they placed their faith in him.

Nothing has changed in Peter's three sermons in the Book of Acts.

One of the sad things in a Believer's life... when God brings changes... is that we sometimes move away from the very things we should NEVER move away from.

PRINCIPLE NUMBER FIVE: Remain focused on the essence of the Gospel. ... You will NEVER mature beyond the basics of the Gospel.

At Pentecost... before the Sanhedrin... and now here... Peter emphasized:
#1 the life of Christ... #2 the death of Christ... #3 the resurrection of Christ...

#4 (and this one we tend to ignore in many of our Gospel presentations) – the return of Christ as the Final Judge... and #6 Christ's offer of salvation.

Peter was just getting started in his message... when his congregation believed... and then... the Holy Spirit interrupted the meeting... and Peter never was able to finish his sermon!

Acts 10:44-48

The age-old promise to Abraham of the blessing of 'all the families of the earth' was at last fulfilled in this event! ... From this point forward... the gospel began to circle the earth. ... In principle... the great gulf had been crossed... the door to the Gentile world had swung open... and would never close again. ... The life-bringing fruit of that day in Caesarea continues to be tasted all over the world. ... That is the significance of the event we have been studying. ... But in terms of how this should impact your life personally... I need to ask... ... Is God calling for change in your life...?

For any true believer... the answer to that is always a “yes”... God will continually be transforming us into the image of His Son... until he takes us home to be with Him forever. So here are five things for you to know as you cooperate with His changing you.

#1. Change always involves risk.

#2. You need to create witnesses to the change God is making.

#3. Once you commit to change – expect testing.

#4. Never assume that God's will is as clear to everyone else as it is to you.

#5. Remain focused on the essence of the Gospel – that will never change!