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LIFE-CHANGING

Lately the *Wheel of Fortune* television game show has been featuring follow-ups with some of their big-money winners. Almost all of them say their winnings were “life-changing.” Some insurance company ads, and their opponents the personal injury lawyers, also describe large settlements as “life-changing.” If this is true, then something may be wrong with their life.

Such events may certainly change the situation of your life. They may make it easier to buy a house or a new car. They may even take someone from homelessness to a permanent home. But those are just situational changes. If they actually change the way you live your life, then you have problems with priorities.

Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? (Matt 6:25-30)

Jesus says that circumstances are not your life. What you do is not who you are. You may work as a secretary or a mechanic or a burger-flipper, but that is not who you are. You may have fifty pairs of shoes in your closet, or just the ones on your feet; that is not who you are. You may even preach for the largest congregation in the world, but that is not who you are.

What do you do with the much or little you have? How do you treat people? How do you treat family? That is who you are.

Paul believed that changing your circumstances would not change who you are. If you got rich and used your money for selfish or evil things, then you remain selfish and evil. This is essentially what he told the Galatians.

Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith. (Gal 6:7-10)

What, then, is truly life-changing? Only obediently trusting Christ changes lives. All have been enslaved by sin. Our lives have been defined by sin. We have been sinners. It was not just what we do, but who we are.

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:9-11)

You were that kind of person. You are not now, because you have been sanctified. If you were that way but are not now, what made the difference? You were born, or can be born, into a new life. Romans 6 describes the process. It is the same as physical death, but on a higher level. One dies to the old life of sin, one is buried by immersion in water, one is resurrected a new life.

Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:4)

Money is never life-changing; it can only be circumstance-changing. Christ is the real life-changer.

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THREE SYNAGOGUES

There is a lot in the news lately about the investigations into the events of January 6, 2021. The news is met with a variety of reactions. Some call the events an insurrection, and hang on every word in the news. Some call it a riot, and meet the news stories with indifference or apathy. Others call it a revolution, and face the news with skepticism. One event, many reactions. The same could be said about the news of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. These reactions may be described by three types of synagogues of the Jewish people and their reaction to Paul.

The Synagogue of Rejection

Paul came to Corinth and, as was his custom, went to the synagogue of the Jews. At first it seemed that he met with some success. "He reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks." (Acts 18:4) After a while Timothy and Titus joined him, and he preached more boldly that Jesus was the Messiah.

In spite of the rejection in the synagogue, Paul "continued there a year and six months."

And when they opposed themselves, and blasphemed, he shook his raiment, and said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles. (Acts 18:6)

Even today, just the mention of the Messiah is enough to get most of the Jewish people to reject a speaker. Many no longer believe in an individual Messiah, but rather a concept of messiahship. It is not just the Jews, however. The Messiah as preached by Paul was a sacrifice for sin who arose triumphant over death. The vast majority of Americans (and even more Europeans) reject the concept of sin and salvation outright. Sin, to them, is not a violation of God's law, but impingement on the rights of others. It is social impropriety.

Some churches who claim to be Christian churches have rejected the idea of sin and salvation. The "social gospel" has replaced Paul's gospel in many places. Surveys show that 60% of Christians age 18-39 believe that Buddhism and Islam are equal regarding the way to

salvation. About 52% of Christians believe that good works will earn them salvation. Only 35% of Americans believe that salvation comes only through Christ. Paul's preaching would be rejected by many Christians today.

Many new Christians who want to change the world for Christ have a hard time facing this fact: most people don't want to be saved because they don't believe there is anything to be saved from. Paul, however, understood that he was not going to be successful every time he preached. There were synagogues of rejection, like the one in Corinth. Over time, people learn to shake their clothing to remove the dust of rejection and move on.

Sometimes rejection is passive. Sometimes it is active. The Corinthian Jews took Paul to court over his teachings. The judge realized that he had no jurisdiction and rejected the suit. Most people take the passive route. In some countries, though, preachers of the gospel have been beaten by unbelievers.

Fortunately, even in a synagogue or church of rejection, there will be some who believe. Paul moved into the house next door to the synagogue and kept teaching the Gentiles. Even then, the Jewish ruler of the Synagogue was baptized. In spite of the rejection in the synagogue, Paul "continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them." (Acts 18:11)

Synagogue of Envy

Paul preached at two synagogues that readily accepted his teachings as long as they were the only ones he taught. Paul came to Pisidian Antioch and went to the synagogue. They asked him if he had anything to say and he preached the gospel beginning with the history of the Jewish people. Many in the congregation became believers. However, envy crept in.

And the next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming. (Acts 13:44-45)

The same thing happened in Thessalonica. He preached for three consecutive sabbaths. "And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few." (Acts 17:4) Others in the congregation, "moved with envy," created a riot.

Envy is a dangerous thing, and it, too, is not limited to the Jewish people. Some Christian churches have been subject to envy. It is surprising that more aren't.

There was a time when the Churches of Christ were accused (perhaps rightly) of believing they were the

only people going to heaven. It was even joked that, “Just because the Baptists go in through the door that doesn’t mean we have to go in through a window.” If someone even suggested visiting another Christian group’s assembly, that person might be rejected out of envy. Others were more relaxed, sometimes, and more popular. Fortunately, most now understand that there may be true, baptized believers in many groups.

Why is a person a Methodist and not a Baptist? Why is one a Presbyterian and another a Congregationalist? Everybody thinks that the way they believe is right, and everybody else has some points on which they are wrong. To some the differences are minor and not related to salvation. To others the differences make all the difference, so to speak. When someone starts getting more followers than they have, they may reject that doctrine, “moved with envy.”

When envy is the only reason to reject a doctrine, that becomes a fault. It may even, as it did with the Jews in Thessalonica and Antioch, cause people to reject the truth. Then it becomes a sin. We should hold our ground on clear biblical doctrine. If someone else preaches sound doctrine, we should rejoice, not become a synagogue of envy. Paul addresses this to the Philippians.

Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will: The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds: But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel. What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice. (Php 1:15-18)

Synagogue of Acceptance

Paul also preached in synagogues that readily accepted his preaching and stayed the course. Immediately after leaving Thessalonica because of envy, Paul went to Berea and found a different attitude.

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so. (Acts 17:11)

Right after Paul left the rejection at Corinth, he traveled to Ephesus. There he taught, and when he had to leave “they desired him to tarry longer time with them.” The Ephesian congregation became one of the leading churches of the first century.

Such synagogues are a preacher’s dream. There were probably some in those congregations that rejected Paul’s message, but they appear to have been few. So few, in fact, that the scriptures emphasize those that did follow him.

What makes a synagogue of acceptance? From these two can we draw any conclusions?

The most obvious conclusion comes from the synagogue in Berea. Any congregation that accepts God’s message will be centered on scripture. The Bereans heard Paul speak on the Sabbath. They either insisted that he continue to teach them the rest of the week or they examined the scriptures on their own. They didn’t settle for a message from the preacher one day a week; they studied daily.

A congregation that is so devoted to the scriptures will insist on the same devotion in their teachers. One characteristic fault of many radio and television preachers is that they don’t quote scripture. They tell you what they claim the Bible says. They hope you don’t verify it. In fact, they make it hard for you to verify because they don’t

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tell you where the scriptures that they do quote can be found. You can listen to a lot of their sermons and never hear chapter and verse. Even in smaller congregations, some preachers follow their example. No matter what faults some people find with the Churches of Christ, few people fault them for not having “book, chapter, and verse preaching.” With modern technology, many preachers in that group project the scriptures (with location references) so the congregation can see “whether those things were so.”

From the Ephesian congregation we find that personal relationships are important. Those people became so attached to Paul that they did not want him to leave, even to fulfil Passover commitments. From the letter Paul wrote to them and other passages in the book of Acts, it is clear that this was not just a case of precheritis. Their loving relationships extended to each other as well. “I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints.” (Eph 1:15) They were a congregation that wanted to congregate. They wanted to be together.

A synagogue of acceptance expects its members to gather together. While it may provide electronic streaming of its services, that is only for those who have a legitimate reason why they cannot be part of the assembly. Everyone possible is expected to join with the church so that they can encourage and be encouraged.

Five synagogues, but of three characteristic types. It is up to each individual to choose the type that appeals to them. No, wait. It is rather up to each individual to choose the type that appeals to God.

WHY SAY THAT?

Non sequitur: a statement that does not follow logically from or is not clearly related to anything previously said. Some people are masters of this. They always bring the conversation back to them, even if it had nothing to do with them in the first place. For example, people talking about where to eat and the person inserts, “Oh, I bought a dog yesterday. Do you want to see pictures?”

Sometimes certain verses in the Bible appear to be a *non sequitur*. Usually, though, if we look closely enough we may be able to learn a possible reason such a statement was made in the first place. One such example may be found in the book of Exodus.

And the LORD said unto Moses, See, I have made thee a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet. Thou shalt speak all that I command thee: and Aaron thy brother shall speak unto Pharaoh, that he send the children of Israel out of his land. ... And Moses and Aaron did as the LORD commanded them, so did they. And Moses was fourscore years old, and Aaron fourscore and three years old, when they spake unto Pharaoh. (Ex 7:1-2; 6-7)

After God tells them to speak to the Pharaoh, and that he won't listen, the author inserts the ages of Moses and Aaron. Why? What does that have to do with telling the ruler to let the Israelites go worship?

Perhaps it is directly related to their ages. It was important to Moses to point out that he was 80 and his brother was 83.

From age three months until age 40, Moses was considered the grandson of the Pharaoh then ruling. This was pretty important. If that king had no sons, then Moses might have inherited the throne of Egypt. (There were two

major queens of Egypt up to that time, but descent usually went through the males.) Because he was actually a foreigner, it might have led to a civil war, but if Moses had not left Egypt under a cloud of murder accusations, he might have inherited. That would have resulted in freeing the Israelite slaves, but it would not have met God's plans. Israel would have remained in Egypt, rather than inhabiting the Promised Land. Moses' self-imposed exile from Egypt was part of God's plan.

During the forty years Moses was in exile, a new Pharaoh took over. We don't know for certain who this was, although some believe it was Ramses the Great. This new Pharaoh was possibly not a direct descendant of the old king. Even if he was, he had probably not yet been born when Moses fled the country. He did not know Moses. He did not fear that Moses was going to try to take the throne. So he probably was too young to have known of Moses' existence in the court.

So here you have Moses and Aaron, in their 80s, and a young Pharaoh, possibly in his 20s or 30s. Add that Moses was seeming to speak as a priest of the God of the Israelites. An aged priest and a young king. By inserting his age in a seeming *non sequitur*, Moses may have been saying that he expected the Pharaoh to listen to him. Age implies wisdom. Priesthood implies authority. This punk kid of a king should have listened to this older man, and let Israel go.

God had different plans. He had already told Moses that the Pharaoh would not listen. Maybe by inserting this, Moses was saying to God, “Why not? He should listen to his elders.” Perhaps the Pharaoh should have; but Moses should have listened to God.

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