

# “Change, Change, Change!”

Philippians 3:12-4:1

Philippians 3

12-14 I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back.

15-16 So let's keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us. If any of you have something else in mind, something less than total commitment, God will clear your blurred vision—you'll see it yet! Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it.

17-19 Stick with me, friends. Keep track of those you see running this same course, headed for this same goal. There are many out there taking other paths, choosing other goals, and trying to get you to go along with them. I've warned you of them many times; sadly, I'm having to do it again. All they want is easy street. They hate Christ's Cross. But easy street is a dead-end street. Those who live there make their bellies their gods; belches are their praise; all they can think of is their appetites.

20-21 But there's far more to life for us. We're citizens of high heaven! We're waiting the arrival of the Savior, the Master, Jesus Christ, who will transform our earthy bodies into glorious bodies like his own. He'll make us beautiful and whole with the same powerful skill by which he is putting everything as it should be, under and around him.

Philippians 4

1 My dear, dear friends! I love you so much. I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy, fill me with such pride. Don't waver. Stay on track, steady in God.

Here's a question for you. How do you respond to change?

When you know change is coming, how do you anticipate it? How do you respond to it when it arrives?

With dread?

With anger?

With Hope?

Anxiety?

With Fear?

Let me give you two biblical responses to change and perhaps you'll find yourself in one of them.

When God's chosen people were delivered out of the hands of slavery, away from the abuse of Egyptian tyranny, they found themselves walking around in a desert, and their response to that change was:

*a. We wish the Lord had killed us in Egypt.*

Here's another example: Paul finds himself sitting in a prison cell, away from his beloved churches, jailed for spreading the gospel, and his response to that change is:

*b. Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, Rejoice!*

If these choices were on a spectrum, in general would you lean left toward the Israelites' response (Lord just kill me) or lean right towards Paul's response? (WOO HOO, bring it on!).

Just Kill Me \_\_\_\_\_+\_\_\_\_\_Rejoice  
(Israelites) (Paul)

Now, let me ask you this. When it comes to change in *the church*, which way would you lean? Let's see a show of hands: Would you lean left towards the Israelites (just kill me) or right towards Paul (Rejoice! Bring it on!)

That's what I thought.

There is a reason that the top ten stressors in life are: moving, getting married, getting a divorce, having a baby, changing jobs—all involve change. **Change is hard.**

Lyle Shaller is a Methodist minister who is a premier organizational consultant and over the past 40 years he has worked with hundreds of churches in organization change and growth. In one of his books, Lyle tells a story about a Roman Catholic nun who died after teaching in the same inner city school for 45 years. She was ushered into heaven and taken to a large and beautiful

classroom that had a whole wall of bookshelves and sunlight streaming from large windows on two sides. It had the most advanced technological instructional equipment, including computers on every desk and a variety of remote controls all updated every year. Showing her around, the Angel said to her:

"Sister, *this* is where you will be spending eternity."

"Oh, NO," said the sister. "I wouldn't know what to do here! I've spent my whole life in a small dark classroom with plaster walls and dirty floors and a tiny bookcase and two pictures: one of the Pope and one of George Washington. Every year we got a new box of chalk and two reams of paper, and one time we even got new desks for the children. This new room is so different, I can't stay, I wouldn't even know what do here."

And the Angel said: "I'm sorry, Sister, but all those classrooms are down below now."

And Dr. Shaller, in his typically blunt way, says: "The moral of this story is that every person has two choices: you can either learn to change and adapt or you can go to...hell." For some of us, anticipating and going through some changes is like going through hell! Now, before you get concerned, let me assure you. I, in no way, believe that those of us who are adverse to, or struggle with, change are going to hell. If that were the case then we'd all be down there together! **Change is hard.** But here's the thing about God. God is always doing a new thing. In all of God's wisdom, God has set the universe so that nothing stays the same. We change, we grow and mature, we get fatter or skinnier, we get wiser (hopefully), sometimes we grow together, sometimes we grow apart. Things change, we change. It is hard to think of one thing God has created that doesn't change. Even the things that don't appear to change, change! Rocks change, trees change. God has set the universe so that nothing stays stagnant and yet for many of us, change is an enemy, something to fight against. Change is difficult because it usually takes us from something we know and are comfortable with into situations that are unknown and unfamiliar. Given a choice, many of us would choose the known over the unknown. If you are highly resistant to change, don't worry, you are not alone.

When the Israelites found themselves wandering around in the desert, they were so frightened by the changes Moses had led them into, they were willing to go back to being slaves in order to avoid the newness of the change of the wilderness and freedom. There is a long history of the people of God being resistant to change and grumbling when change happens.<sup>1</sup> Here's a trivia question. Do you know what the seven last words of the church are? "We've never done it that way before!"

When John Wesley was leading his renewal movement, a movement called "Methodism," there was enormous resistance from the institutional church to this preacher who wanted to say that all people were equal in the eyes of God. He was stoned and beaten by some crowds and evicted from many pulpits for his "new ideas."

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of responses to change in the church are from Reverend Harvey Martz.

When the Revised Standard Translation of the Bible was finished in 1946, many churches had Bible burning parties to burn this “Devilish” translation of scripture because it was different from the King James translation they had been using for 400 years. You cannot change the word of God, they said...because you know Jesus spoke in King James English. **Change is hard.** Especially for the church. The institutional church stands on a long legacy of defending the status quo and resisting the new. Yet God is always doing a new thing.

With this kind of legacy, what do we do? We are certainly in the midst of change! Like the Israelites, we’ve been displaced from our normal place of worship. Like the Philippians, we’re without a head of staff. How do we navigate through all these changes in a healthy way? Here are four ways, all gleaned from Paul in his letter to the Philippians.

First: Step up, not out! When churches are in an interim period or in the middle of change, it is so easy to think “step out” instead of “step up.” Stepping out sounds a little like this:

*I’m going to sit back and watch and wait, until I see who the new pastor will be.*

*or*

*I think I’ll skip worship for the summer. It’s in the Fellowship Hall and I miss the sanctuary, and they are doing all that construction.*

*or*

*Let’s not make any decisions until we see what happens....*

That’s “stepping out” mentality. Yet, in all that we do, God asks us to step *up* for the sake of the gospel. Even more so when we’re in the middle of transition. We’re asked to get our hands dirty, to increase our participation, increase our support, to become energized for the new thing that God is doing in our midst. *I can assure you whether we want it or not, God is doing, and will continue to do, new things for the sake of getting the gospel to those who do not yet have it, and for equipping those who do.* Step up! Not out.

Here’s the second thing: *Stay focused on the Goal.* Paul couldn’t have said it better. Stay focused on the goal and keep track of those who are running the same course and working towards the same goal. Forty years ago, the goal of this church was this: *Go out there...and get the gospel to those who do not know it, bring them here, and equip them to go back out there to start the cycle all over.* That was the goal then, and it’s the goal now. It’s not about larger numbers or buildings or organs or programs or even institutional preservation; it’s always been about helping people build a relationship with Christ and with each other as a community of faith.

Here’s the third thing: Become a cheerleader. Paul’s entire letter to the Philippians is full of encouragement for striving toward the goal. The church, *this church*, needs cheerleaders. Over the past three years, I know there have been moments of consternation and anxiety. Some of you wanted a new building and some of you didn’t. Some wanted a new pipe organ and some didn’t.

Some people wanted to start a contemporary service, and some people said don't mess with tradition. ***But the reality is, soon, and very soon, we are going to have a new building, an organ and a new service that will open up all kinds of possibilities for this church.*** God is doing a new thing with us. It's time to step up and be *future focused*. God ***WILL*** do great things through us. Be a cheerleader. How you speak about the church has everything to do with how people feel about the church, and it has everything to do with motivation and enthusiasm.

Earlier in the sermon I said that it's very hard to think of even one thing that God has created that doesn't change. Well, here is one thing that doesn't change. God's love for us. God's love for the church. God's love for you. That ***NEVER*** changes. So the healthiest behavior a church in transition can have is to trust God. When the Israelites were running around in the desert, mad at Moses for the changes that had happened, mad that they were hungry and tired, disappointed about the way things were going, wishing for the way things used to be, what was missing was their trust that God would do what God needed to do to care for them. **Change is hard.** It can knock us off-center, it can make us fearful and anxious. Yet, God is a God of change.

This is such a great church, sometimes I wish that you could see and experience the things I get to see and experience from my unique perspective of being one of your pastors. Several Sundays ago, I was getting ready for the second service and as I walked through the Commons Area, out of the corner of my eye I saw a little girl about 5 years old run into the arms of a woman who was not her mother or any other relative. It was a friend she knew from church. It was a gift to witness that great, big hug. There are more children out there who need that kind of hug...which is why we have to *step up*. A week ago, I went to dinner with members of a small group, and we laughed and talked and I thought about these women and how God has blessed them with the gift of friendship, and care. There are people out there who need that kind of community...which is why we have to *keep striving toward the goal*. Three weeks ago, I was at the Senior brunch and we sat around telling stories about the Seniors, and so many of the stories involved funny things that happened in Mexico and LOGOS or during Leadertreks. There are other youth out there who need to know the laughter of God, which is *why we have to be cheerleaders, champions for our church*.

It is amazing the things we pastors get to see. Every now and again, I can see that the Spirit has moved you in some way. Maybe it's in a smile, or in your tears, or how you discreetly move to the music. Sometimes it is a sigh. When I'm really fortunate, you come and tell me what moved you. For instance, I know a mother who loves it when her young son says, "In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven." She knows he doesn't fully understand, but she also knows that one day he will. I also know that every time we say the Lord's Prayer there is a husband in this congregation that reaches out to hold the hand of his wife. There are people out there who need to know about forgiveness and about love. Which is why we have to trust God to provide for us and work through us to do new things. This is a great church. And there are people out there who need this place of possibilities. God is doing a new thing. So, trust God. Step up. Keep striving toward the Goal, and be a cheerleader, a champion for your church!

**AMEN!!**

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