



THE STABILITY OF YOUR TIMES, PT. 2

Isaiah 33:2-6

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²O LORD, be gracious to us; we wait for you.

Be our arm every morning,
our salvation in the time of trouble.

³At the tumultuous noise peoples flee;
when you lift yourself up, nations are scattered,

⁴and your spoil is gathered as the caterpillar gathers;
as locusts leap, it is leapt upon.

⁵The LORD is exalted, for he dwells on high;
he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness,

⁶and he will be the stability of your times,
abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge;
the fear of the LORD is Zion's treasure.

Introduction

Last week's sermon was like the flight from Chicago to Indianapolis. I've flown it many times. No sooner does the plane reach cruising altitude then you begin your descent. I'm afraid that's what happened last week. No sooner did we get the sermon off the ground then I began our descent toward the benediction.

Last week I shared with you some of the principles and perspectives that guide my own thinking regarding change. I felt that was important. But today I want to address the question of how you should respond to change. I'm thinking primarily of how you ought to respond to change at church, but I trust you'll find the teaching of God's word relevant for responding to any kind of change.

Change is hard. Few of us like change, especially when change affects something important to us, like our church.

Sometimes churches make change hard because they make a bad decision about change, or the decision itself is badly communicated or badly implemented. When this happens, congregants can feel beat-up in the process. In fact, they may even start wondering whether the leadership has forgotten that what Jesus said to Peter was, "Feed my sheep," not "Try experiments on my rats." ¹

But even good change can be hard. Even if the change is perfectly managed, it can still be very difficult. Change calls into question the past. Change creates uncertainty about the future.

¹ I'm borrowing this way of putting it from C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*.

And change exposes our own insecurities. In short, change often creates fear: anxiety, uncertainty, insecurity, fear.

How to Respond to Change

This is why we need to know how to respond to change. We need to understand how God wants us to respond to change.

Today's passage shows us how God wants his people to respond to change. Here in this passage, the people of Israel are on the verge of massive change. Assyria, the regional superpower of the day, is poised to invade their country and ransack their capital, Jerusalem.

Understandably, the Israelites feared this sort of change. They, of course, feared the loss of everything they treasured. They feared the loss of their nation, their city, their livelihoods, their possessions, their families, their very own lives.

Yet the Prophet Isaiah has a word from the Lord. He has a word of hope and assurance from the Lord. And he calls them to respond to this massive change not with fear—but with fear. Don't fear the Assyrians. Instead, as he says to them, "the fear of the Lord is your treasure" (33:6).

It's a classic case of fighting fire with fire. You're not to fear change—you're to fear *the Lord*. We're to fight fear with fear: fighting the fear of change with the fear of the Lord.

The Lord is Above the Fray of Change (v. 5a).

But why does the Lord call you and me to fear—not change—but Him? Because of who He is, and because of what He's committed to do in your life and in the world, and because of how much He's already given you.

Change often makes you feel dizzy, especially when there's a lot of it. In fact, when you step into the fray of change, it can feel like stepping into one of those spinning rides at the amusement park: you just go round and round and round!

This past year has felt a little bit like that for Katie and me. When we move back to Oak Park in a few week's time, it will be the fourth move in one year. It will have been the fourth summer in a row we've moved. It will have been the eleventh place we've lived in just over thirteen years of marriage.

Sometimes it feels like we've lived our whole married life in the fray of change. And I know for a fact that we're not the only ones who've stepped into the fray of change. I've talked with many of you, and your lives feel much the same as ours.

But do you know what God wants to encourage you and me with?—*He is above the fray of change*.

This is the first point we see in this passage: *Don't fear change. Fear the Lord, because the Lord is above the fray of change*.

You see how Isaiah encourages the Israelites to not let their eyes settle on the Assyrians. Instead, they must lift up their eyes and look and see the Lord. "The Lord is exalted," the Isaiah says, "for he dwells on high" (33:5).

The Lord is above the fray of change.

The Psalmist understood this about who God is.

Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end (102:25-28).

Theologians refer to this aspect of who God is as God's *immutability*. A rather impressive sounding word, it points to a precious truth about who God is. He is immortal, invisible, God only wise, the God we sing about in the hymn by that title:

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great Name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;
Thy justice, like mountains, high soaring above,
Thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all, life Thou givest, to both great and small;
In all life Thou livest, the true life of all;
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
And wither and perish—but naught changeth Thee.

The Lord is above the fray of change.

So, whenever you find yourself thrust into the fray of change, and whenever you feel anxiety on the rise because of change, remember this:

- Stop staring at the Assyrians!
- Instead, lift up your gaze.
- Look, with the eyes of faith.
- See the Lord, seated upon the throne—exalted.
- And choose to place your trust in Him—choose to fear Him.
- For He dwells on high, above the fray of change.

The Lord is Committed to the Best Kind of Change (v. 5b).

You ought to fear the Lord—and not change—because the Lord is above the fray of change. That's the first point.

Yet that point can be easily misunderstood. You might be tempted to think that because the Lord is above the fray of change, He is somehow *detached* from change.

But it doesn't work like that. In fact, the God of the Bible is the great change agent. His sovereign hand is behind every change.

More than that, the change the Lord makes is always the best kind of change. This is the second thing the Prophet Isaiah assures the Israelites of as they confront change.

As it turns out, their capital city, Jerusalem, Zion, is going to be ransacked. It is going to be trampled upon by foreigners. But that is not the end of the story. No, Isaiah assures them: "he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness" (33:5).

Sometimes despite appearances, the Lord is committed to his people. Israel needed to know and embrace this fact. They are to fear the Lord because he's committed to them—and he's committed to the best kind of change. What they truly long for in their city and in their lives, God will one day surely accomplish for them.

Just a few chapters later, we find Isaiah lifting up his voice again, and pointing the people of God to the good change the Lord himself is committed to; indeed, it is good news.

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Behold your God!" (40:9)

But the Lord's commitment to the best kind of change does not end with Israel alone. No, the Lord is committed to filling *the whole earth* with justice and righteousness. He's committed to the best kind of change for the whole earth, as the Lord himself declares:

For behold, I create new heavens
and a new earth,
and the former things shall not be remembered
or come into mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in that which I create;
for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy,
and her people to be a gladness (65:17-18).

Perhaps you feel like there's been an Assyrian invasion at Calvary. You're seeing changes, and you're noticing good things leaving Calvary. Let me assure you with the words of Isaiah: *the Lord will fill Calvary with good things*. He will fill this church with justice and righteousness. I can't. But the Lord can, and he will. You've got to trust in that. You've got to trust in him. You've got to fear—not change—but the Lord, who is committed to the best kind of change.

The Lord is Unchanging in the Midst of Change (v. 6a).

Not only is the Lord above the fray of change, and committed to the best kind of change, but, thirdly, the Lord is unchanging in the midst of change. He is, as Isaiah says, "the stability of your times" (33:6).

- God's life does not change.

- God's character does not change.
- God's truth does not change.
- God's ways do not change.
- God's purposes do not change.
- And God's *Son* does not change.²

The Lord is, therefore, our stability in the midst of change because the Lord is himself unchanging in the midst of change, but because he has given you everything you need in his Son, Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ, there is “abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge.” As Paul says, God has made Jesus Christ to be for us “our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). He's all those things.

Do you realize and are you resting in the abundance that is yours in Christ? There in his cross and resurrection is everything you and I need. And that can never change. Change itself cannot ultimately affect that. No matter how dramatic the change is, it cannot touch what you already have in the Jesus Christ.

Therefore, the fear of the Lord is to be your treasure.

If your treasure is in Christ, then your treasure is untouchable. And this will help you handle any and every kind of change. When your treasure is an unchanging God, who has already given you everything valuable in his Son, change cannot threaten you. Change cannot take from you what is most precious to you.

What does it look like, then, to learn the secret of responding to change—not with fear of change—but with the fear of the Lord? The family of Jonathan Edwards, that great American pastor and theologian, learned that secret. They learned that the Lord alone is the stability of their times.

Toward the end of his life, the pastor theologian, Jonathan Edwards, was called from Stockbridge, where he and his family had been living, to become the Principal of the newly formed Princeton College. So, he made the trip with his youngest daughter, Lucy, anticipating the rest of his large family, including his wife, a short while later.

In Princeton, there was an outbreak of smallpox, and so Edwards, at the advice of his doctor, was himself inoculated. But something went horribly wrong. He wasn't inoculated, but infected, and died just a few weeks later.

On his deathbed, Edwards called for his youngest daughter, Lucy, who was with him at the time. He wanted to speak to her of this massive change in his life, and in her life and the life of the entire family. Listen to what he said to her:

Dear Lucy, it seems to me to be the will of God, that I must shortly leave you; therefore give my kindest regards to my dear wife, and tell her, that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been of such a nature, as trust is spiritual, and therefore will continue for ever. And I hope she will be supported

² See J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, pp. 77-81, for a beautiful exposition of these points.

under so great a trial and submit cheerfully to the will of God. And as to my children, you are now like to be fatherless, which I hope will be an inducement to you all, to seek a Father who will never fail you.

On March 22, 1758, Jonathan Edwards was called home to God of his salvation. When the news of his death reached his wife, Sarah, she responded with similar confidence and fear of the Lord. Writing to their daughter, Esther, she says this:

O My Very Dear Child, What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands upon our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness, that we had him so long. But my God lives; and he has my heart. O what a legacy my husband, and your father, has left us! We are all given to God; and there I am, and love to be.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, may each one of you know the secret to responding to change: To know that the Lord is above the fray of change. He is committed to the best kind of change. And he has already given you everything precious in his Son, Jesus Christ.

When you confront change, therefore, you are to fear—not the change—but the Lord. Let the fear of the Lord be your treasure. For the Lord is the only thing—the only One—that will never change.

And as we move forward together as a church through times of change, let me remind you of a few important truths.

- I'm here to serve you.
- We're in this together.
- Jesus Christ is the head of this church.
- He will accomplish His purposes at Calvary.
- The head of the church is the very one who has died for the church.
- He's died for your sins and mine.

The Lord is the stability of your times. He has abundance of salvation, wisdom and knowledge. And he has given that to us in his Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.