

Here To Stay

October 4, 2020

By Rev Paul Graham

Read Acts 13:1-12



A cheeky joke: *"How many Baptists does it take to change a lightbulb?"*

"Change?!?!?"

(I apologise to those who think this would be better suited to a different denomination, but I think we should be allowed to recognise our own failings...)

In the midst of all the anxiety and worry about the pandemic and the threat of an invisible enemy at the gates, we've also had to embrace an awful lot of enforced change over a short period of time. We can point at so many ways that life has been made to change for us in the course of the last six months; who we meet, how far we travel, what how much of each other's faces we see, and so on.

There have been so many changes that have brought restrictions, changes that have forced plans to be ripped up or at best delayed, changes that have affected every aspect of life, changes that will live far longer than this pandemic.

But there have also been positive changes; some have revelled in the extra time they have been given as volunteering responsibilities have stopped, whereas others have thrived whilst working from home

without the pressure of commuting. We've seen new friendships crop up as people have looked out for their neighbours and we've suddenly noticed that people who look after the health of the nation are quite a bit more important than we previously thought. We've changed attitudes as well as behaviour.

We are being bombarded by change in government policy and guidance, with each new day heralding a shift from yesterday's rules to yet another new normal that might last until tomorrow. Or not.

So, we are in a season of change, as is our reading.

Change in the reading comes in many forms, so let's take a moment to go through them.

Firstly, there's a change in the narrative; Luke shifts focus from the church in its inception in Jerusalem and subsequent persecution to enable Saul to take centre stage. Peter and the others will still appear in the forthcoming chapters, but Saul assumes the mantle of main character; all action from now on stems from his missionary journeys and the ramifications of his travels across the wider world.

Secondly, there's a change in Saul himself; whereas up to now he's been known by his Jewish name, Luke adopts his Gentile-friendly name of Paul from verse 9 onwards. No longer associated with the first (failed) king of the Old Testament, Paul is identifiable by Jews and Gentiles alike without confusion or mixed messaging^[1].

And then there are the changes that happen to those we meet in the story. The church in Antioch go through a change in leadership; we hear about those who were in charge just in time for them to lose two of their number to start a mission beyond their borders. For those who read out loud, we can probably be grateful that the more easily pronounceable Paul and Barnabas are the ones we follow from this point onwards...

Finally, there are the changes that occur in Paphos; for the Roman proconsul, the change is from reliance on magic to the good news of Jesus Christ. For his resident magician, his change is both to his status and also a temporary change in his eyesight. Paul, it has been speculated, uses blindness as a method because it echoed his own conversion experience. For him, blindness was a result of the glorious presence of Jesus; maybe he hoped for a similar outcome for the one who was named the "Son of Jesus" (whether this was our Jesus or just anyone called Yeshua is unclear but unlikely as Luke would surely have mentioned it).

Change is good and bad; sometimes what is good news for one is not such good news for another. For Paul and Barnabas, for example, their transformation from church leadership to itinerant missionaries would have been exciting and one to be welcomed. Spare a thought, however, for Simeon, Lucius and Manaen who are left to build up the church in Antioch without their colleagues in ministry.

What was good news for the proconsul (and certainly for those who would otherwise have faced persecution) wasn't such good news for his magician and his family, who would have lost his livelihood as well as his sight. This change had ramifications not just for the local area but also in the wider Roman world. It's a shame that we don't get a chance to follow up on Sergius Paulus, particularly at his next local "proconsul get-together..."

Change for us is also good and bad; depending on what the change entails and where it takes us dictates whether it is welcomed or resisted. Change can mean a new way of working, living and interacting - sometimes to our advantage and sometimes less so. Change can mean that what used to be true is no longer valid, available or possible - sometimes these are mourned, other times celebrated.

But where is God in the midst of change?

Sometimes the change is from God; after all, he sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to offer a continual act of

transforming change in our lives, which Paul preached and lived. Certainly, the change in the Antioch church was at God's directing to Paul and Barnabas to head off to pastures new. Equally, the proconsul's change of heart was down to the testimony of those two missionaries.

Sometimes the change seems to be very much not of God, but that's not to say that God isn't bang in the middle of it. Our own constantly changing world of the pandemic has its own causes and roots; I'm yet to be convinced that God caused any of this to happen. However, I am convinced that God is right in the middle of it with us; though we might not realise it, the Holy Spirit is still active, offering comforting peace alongside transforming grace.

So, change is here to stay. We mourn what we lose with those changes or we rejoice that we no longer have to do things in the same way again; we worry about what the future might look like now or we celebrate the new paths that open up before us; we resist what upsets our equilibrium or we embrace the "new normal." However, we respond, we recognise that the one thing that never changes is God, as revealed through Jesus Christ: his love, his grace, his mercy and his welcome.

Amen.

[1] There are a number of reasons why this might have been important. The Greek form of the name Saul (Saulos) was used to describe the walk of a prostitute - not something that Paul wanted to be associated with! Equally, the name Saul was associated with the failure of the first King to follow God's plans; again, not desirable for Paul in his mission of gospel hope. Finally, the name Paul (Paulos) translates as "small", which could be a nickname relating to Paul's stature, or a statement of his desire to humble himself before God. Take your pick...

(Photo by [Chris Lawton](#) on [Unsplash](#))
