

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE MIND: FACING THE MONSTERS THAT COME CALLING DAY AND NIGHT

Chapter 5

When the earth quakes: Weathering change

(Revised 8/26/05)

A mother and her teenage daughter sat in my office with tears in their eyes, asking for advice and prayer. For the past twenty years their family had lived happily in another state. But over the past two years, they had suffered one reversal after another. Their business had failed and they were forced in bankruptcy court. Their house was foreclosed, and many of their possessions taken away. They had moved to our area because the promise of a job glimmered brighter here than at home. Hoping for a fresh start, they moved in with an acquaintance only to discover that their friendship had grown colder than a Minnesota winter and now they couldn't get along. In addition, her husband's hoped-for job vanished like the morning fog and unemployment had now run out. At her wit's end, she was ready to leave her husband and take her daughter and go home.

"What are we going to do?" she sobbed fitfully. "We've been through so many changes over the past two years. I don't think that I can endure another one. What happened to our dreams of security and living happily ever after?"

Perhaps you've never had to go through a bankruptcy or a forced termination or moved to stay one step ahead of the landlord. But I'm sure you have a few stories to tell about the changes you've seen in your lifetime. I know I do.

Twenty-five years ago I was a college student whose biggest worry was what to do on Saturday night. Twenty years ago I was a seminary graduate filled with hopes for how I would change the world. Now I can catalog my concerns. Talk about change! Mid-life is staring me in the face and 50 is looking younger all the time. With three adolescents in the house, I am face to face with those dreaded “D” words that strike terror in the heart of every parent—Driving & Dating.

How will I ever live through driver’s training, raging hormones, puberty, athletic events, first dates, college tuition, weddings, and grandkids? Who knows where my career will lead and the changes I’ll be faced with in that arena? What changes will I be forced to endure?

Try as we might, there’s no way to get away from change. A sage much wiser than I stated one of the profound paradoxes of life, “The only thing certain about life is change.” And yet, while change follows us like a shadow, most of us try to lose it as did Peter Pan his shadow. Or perhaps we view change like my good friends Calvin and Hobbes did in a cartoon strip I read recently.

Hobbes: Are you making any resolutions for the New Year?

Calvin: Nope! I want everything to stay the same as it was this year.

Hobbes: Everything?

Calvin: Right. This year was lousy, but at least it’s familiar. I hate change! It’s too disruptive! When things are different, you have to think about the change and deal with it! I like things to stay the same, so I can take everything for granted! Besides, things keep changing for the worse! The longer I live, the more

complicated everything gets! I say let's stop here before life gets any harder!

From now on, no more change!

I'm bored. Let's do something different.

Hobbes: Some things don't change.



If a poll were taken, most of us would vote with Calvin for things to stay the same. We long for status quo. The sad fact of reality, however, is that even though we may try not to change, the world and others around us change at warp speed. When it comes to change, we're no longer in the fast lane. We've been nudged into the laser lane.

The question that should be burning a hole through our frontal lobes is not, "How can I avoid change and remain the same?" but rather, "How can I survive change and live to tell about it?" That's the question that haunts me at 3:00AM in the morning when the

monsters come calling. And I don't know about you, but I don't want to merely survive the changes that are coming. I want to be able to triumph over them in the end as well as enjoy victory during the process. But where do I turn to discover that secret?

As I contemplated the answer to that question, my thoughts turned to Joshua, a man who went through countless changes during his lifetime. His career progressed from slave to servant to spy to soldier to statesman. Talk about career changes! He was in his 80's when he began the conquest of Canaan. How many mid-life crises can one man endure?! In addition, he endured the grief and loneliness that accompanied the loss of his friend and mentor, Moses. He was filled with the fear of failure as he contemplated leading Israel into the unknown of a new land and a new era.

Fortunately for Joshua and us as well, God knows our fear of the future, the unknown, and especially change, and does not send us unarmed or unprepared to face that nameless foe. In chapter one of the book that bears his name, God gave Joshua a series of commands that can serve as signposts to guide us through the whitewater rapids of change.

ANTICIPATE THE CERTAINTY OF CHANGE

Joshua 1:1 begins with a statement of change, "After the death of Moses." Change hits like a sledgehammer when a long-serving, beloved CEO of a major corporation suddenly dies, when a successful coach like John Wooden of UCLA retires, or when a national leader is unexpectedly removed from the scene. In our generation, the closest example of the latter would have to be the assassination of President Kennedy in 1962 in the USA or the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981.

In addition to the grief that follows a major loss, there is also the question of how his followers will respond to his successor. The longer the leader has served and the more beloved he was places a greater burden on whoever steps into his shoes. Rather than follow a legend, it's better to follow the one who follows the legend. Followers of UCLA Bruin basketball might argue that everyone who followed Coach Wooden has been an "interim" because they never matched up or were as successful. As a result, the UCLA faithful have never quite accepted those coaches.

Joshua must have faced those same fears—"Would the people follow me like they did Moses?" After all, Moses had led Israel for 40 years and accomplished miracle after miracle in doing so. Talk about having a tough act to follow. The difference in Joshua's case is that Moses' death was neither sudden nor unexpected. This wasn't the sudden heart attack of a young man on the golf course. Moses' death was anticipated.

In Numbers 27:13-23, God not only foretold the death of Moses but also made sure that Joshua was commissioned as his successor in front of the entire assembly. The people of Israel knew that change was on its way.

God made it crystal clear that his plan depends on no one for all times, but for all who follow him at a certain time. Time on earth is brief, even for God's best. Yet in spite of the brevity, God gives each of us time to be part of his plan.

Rather than doom Joshua to wring his hands in fear and worry at an unexpected turn of events, God gave him time to anticipate and prepare for the change. While that may sound quite simplistic, it is also one of the key principles in dealing with and surviving change.

As was said earlier, the only thing certain about life is change. It is inevitable. We chuckle at or feel sorry for those who resist change. At one time the Duke of Cambridge is reported to have said, “Any change at any time for any reason is to be deplored.” That sounds a bit like the old saying “Come weal, come woe, my status is quo.”¹ Along that same line, a letter was once delivered to the President of the United States. It illustrates that often our early resistance to change seems rather foolish when viewed from a slightly different perspective.

January 31, 1829

President Jackson,

The canal system of this country is being threatened by the spread of a new form of transportation known as railroads. The federal government must preserve the canals for the following reasons.

One, if boats are supplanted by railroads, serious unemployment will result. Captains, cooks, drivers, hostlers, repairmen and lock tenders will be left without means of livelihood, not to mention the numerous farmers now employed in growing hay for horses.

Two, boat builders would suffer and towline, whip, and harness makers would be left destitute.

Three, canal boats are absolutely essential to the defense of the United States. In the event of the expected trouble with England, the Erie Canal would be the only means by which we could ever move the supplies so vital to waging modern war.

As you may well know, Mr. President, railroad carriages are pulled at the enormous speed of 15 miles per hour by engines which, in addition to endangering life and limb of passengers, roar and snort their way through the countryside, setting fire to crops, scaring the livestock and frightening women and children. The Almighty certainly never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speed.

Sincerely Yours,

Martin Van Buren

Governor of New York²

Rather than resist change, we should anticipate and prepare for it. The earlier we anticipate the change and the better we prepare for it, the smoother we can sand the rough edges of fear and the easier we will be able to adapt to it once it arrives.

One of the joys of pastoral ministry is performing weddings. Having worked with singles for a number of years, I've done my share. Before I will agree to perform the wedding, the couple must agree to participate in at least six sessions of premarital counseling. Most couples spend countless hours and dollars preparing for their wedding—getting the right dress, tux, reception hall, ceremony, and honeymoon. During our own wedding preparations, my wife and I even spent one afternoon tasting cakes to get the right cake with the right filling with the right frosting.

While the couple is often focused on preparing for the wedding, I try to help them prepare for their marriage, because it will hopefully last longer than the wedding itself. We talk about principles of good communication, conflict resolution, roles and responsibilities, in-law relationships, expectations, finances, and sex. One of the goals of

the counseling is to help them talk about areas of their relationship that they probably have not thought about and to anticipate the changes and conflicts that are bound to come.

The average couple in my experience goes into marriage with blinders on, only seeing the good points of their fiancé and with some lofty expectations. Some time after the wedding and the blissful fog of the honeymoon lifts, they will wake up one morning and realize they married a stranger. The blushing bride will discover that her shining knight has rust spots on his armor or that his white charger has a swayed back. While I cannot stop that process, I can at least loosen the straps on the blinders and enlarge their field of vision.

The first signpost leading us through the whitewater rapids of change is to anticipate and prepare for the change. The next three signposts are found in three commands God gave Joshua in Joshua 1:1-9. Each command is followed by a corresponding promise. With each stroke deeper into the rapids, God reminds Joshua and us as well, that if we continue to move ahead, he will do something to help us get through safely.

TAKE THE FIRST STEP IN FAITH . . . AND THEN FOLLOW IT

The second signpost is found in verses 2-4 and it explains that we are to take the first step in faith . . . and then follow it with other steps of faith.

“Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites.³ I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses.⁴ Your

territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Great Sea on the west.

In verse 2, Joshua and the people are commanded to “cross this Jordan.”³ He is not told to prepare for the crossing as the NIV indicates, but rather is to move forward and get over the first wet obstacle, as the NASB explains.

One of the interesting aspects of this section is that the promise of success comes after the command to obey. The people could not take possession of the land until they had first crossed the Jordan. Like the Oklahoma land rush of the 1860’s, the nation of Israel could claim any land that they walked on. But before they could stake their claim and file the deed, there was this little matter of a flood-swollen river that had to be dealt with.

As 3:14-17 tells the story, the waters did not part until the priests put one foot into the water. “The priests, like drum majors leading a three-million-member marching band, had to hike to the brink of the flood-swollen Jordan and take that first step into the water. Then—and only then—would God perform a miracle, roll back the waters, dry up the puddles, and send the people across kicking up dust at every step! Dry sandals followed trusting obedience.”⁴

A few years ago, our family took a ferry from Seattle over to the Olympic Peninsula where we spent a few days camping and visiting the Hoh Rain Forest. On the last day of our vacation, we drove up to Hurricane Ridge in the Olympic National Forest. In the 17 mile drive from Port Angeles to Hurricane Ridge, the road rises over 5,000 feet. Part way up the mountain is a scenic turnout. From that vantage point we could see the city of Port Angeles below us. On a clear day (unfortunately, not the one we were there)

you can gaze across the Strait of Juan de Fuca and see Victoria, British Columbia. On a crystal clear day, you can see Whistler Mountain in British Columbia, some 150 miles away.

On a crystal clear day when you can seemingly see forever, there is a great temptation to spend the whole day at the scenic turnout admiring the view, and never make the drive the rest of the way up the mountain. Now you may be thinking, “What idiot would settle for a turnout instead of Hurricane Ridge?” The obvious answer is “No one.”

Yet that is the temptation that tugs at our heart when we are face to face with the snarling fangs of change. We are tempted to pull off to the side of the road and simply admire the view from a safer, albeit lower vantage point. Just as Israel could not conquer and settle the Promised Land from the east side of the Jordan River, so we cannot be successful if we fearfully stop short of change and stay on the safe edge of transition.

The reason Joshua did not need to be fearful as he faced the prospect of crossing the Jordan at flood stage and why we need not be fearful when staring nervously at change is the promise of God’s presence. In verse 5, God said to Joshua, “No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.”

When faced with the prospect of transition and change, we can face it with confidence because God has promised to be with us. Like a child whose father promises to hold his hand while walking through a dark and spooky forest, we can have confidence that God will not fail us or leave us alone. What a comforting thought when I wake up in a cold sweat at 2:30 in the morning.

Over the past decade, I have been on numerous short-term ministry trips to Russia, Ukraine, Spain, and Nigeria. Each one involved a variety of details, planning, and hardships, and stretching experiences. On more than one occasion, I found myself waking up at 3:30 AM worrying how to pull off that particular day's challenge. Many times as I would wake up in a strange place far from home, I would remind myself that God was with me and that he promised never to leave me. That knowledge proved to be a great encouragement and comfort.

What opportunity or challenge has God placed in front of you? Is he leading you to move to another city, begin a family, change careers, take on a new ministry, start a business, go back to school, or let go of your children so that they can go into missions? Two people in our church faced similar challenges as they switched careers because of the economic downturns in their corporations.

Teri received notice that the company she was working for was downsizing and her job would be eliminated in two months. After the initial shock wore off, she decided that rather than stay in a field that was drying up, she would return to school in order to learn to become a computer technician.

John was a salesman for a pharmaceutical company. Because of the changes in the field of healthcare, he too returned to school to study electronics. At the same time, he and his wife examined their finances and worked to become debt free. Thus, when the time came to change careers, they were not dependent on needing the same amount in his paycheck.

Both of these people faced career changes with confidence because they knew that God was with them. Rather than fret and hang onto their dying careers, they took the first step in faith and returned to school.

BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS

I may do all that I can to anticipate and prepare for certain changes and I may take the first step in faith and enter the whitewater rapids of change. I may be confident that God is with me. But as I gingerly put one oar in the water and circumnavigate through the rapids and around the hidden boulders, monsters will arrive to challenge my progress. If I listen to their whispers, eventually I will be seized with fear. Unable to move, doubts swirl through my mind like fog. “Where do I turn? Which way do I go? We’re all going to die! There’s no way I’ll get out of this alive.”

While we are frozen with fear, we frantically look around us for some clue as to where to turn and what to do. And suddenly, as if it appeared out of nowhere, we see another signpost. It rises like an oasis in the middle of a dry and dusty desert. It is the signpost that wipes away our fear, “Be strong and courageous.”

Three times in verses 6, 7, and 9, God commands Joshua and us to be strong and courageous. Isn’t it just like God to meet us at our point of need? In the midst of fear that threatens to derail our progress through change, God encourages us to be strong and take courage.

God’s words of encouragement are not a trite “Buck up” or “Keep a stiff upper lip” or a senseless whistling in the dark. He gives two promises with the command that explains why we can have confidence in the midst of uncertainty. The first one reassured Joshua that he would gain possession of the land. It is the promise of success.

When our children were younger, we would read to them before they went to bed. Together, we enjoyed book series like *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Spirit Flyer*. After reading a chapter or two and leaving the hero or heroine on the edge of disaster, my children would beg to know what happens next. And every time I would say, “We’ll have to wait ‘til tomorrow to read the next chapter.” But after sending them to put their pajamas on and brush their teeth, I admit that I’d flip ahead a few pages or to the end of the book to see how it all turned out.

By promising Joshua that he would gain possession of the land, God was letting him know how the story would turn out. He didn’t explain all the details of how it would take place or how many battles would be fought, but God let him know that in the final chapter, Joshua would be on the winning side.

If I’m currently in chapter 9 of the story of my life, and it closes with a great deal of uncertainty, I will undoubtedly be worried and fearful. But if I know that in chapter 21, my story will end in victory, I can breathe a sigh of relief and move forward with confidence. That’s what God did for Joshua.

The second promise that God gave Joshua was a reiteration of the earlier promise of his presence. He once again said, “I will be with you.”

The farther we move into and through a period of change, the greater will be the temptation to second-guess not only God’s instruction, but especially his presence. I will be tempted to think, “I’m all alone. No one cares or even knows that I’m here. I’m on my own.” It’s at that very moment that I need to be reminded over and over again that I’m not alone. I need to know that my heavenly Father is with me holding my hand every step of the way. And that’s exactly what God tells me.

BECOME A STUDENT OF THE BOOK

The third and final signpost that helps me to navigate through the whitewater rapids of change reminds me to be an obedient student of God's Word. It commands me to meditate on scripture and to obey it.

In Joshua 1:8, God told Joshua, "Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."

Like Joshua, I must come to the realization that if I desire to do great things for God and experience the riches he desires for me, I must be a student of the Word. It means that I need a plan to read it, study it, as well as to memorize it. It must permeate my life to the point where I go around talking to myself and the words that I am saying are the words of Scripture. The word "meditate" in 1:8 literally means to "mutter." Scripture becomes such an important and all-consuming part of my life that I even mutter it under my breath to myself.

I have always admired people who had command of a vast memory of Scripture, who if I asked them about a subject or topic could bring up an appropriate verse to answer my question. One such person was a plastic surgeon who not only knew Scripture but also had committed a large number of hymns to memory as well. But when his wife left him and his family fell apart, we began to wonder what was really going on in his life.

While it is important to memorize and meditate on Scripture, the second half of 1:8 points out that we must be careful to obey Scripture as well. In addition to allowing the Bible to fill our minds, we must ensure that it permeates our attitudes and our actions,

our beliefs and our behaviors. Having a command of Scripture and being able to answer Bible trivia is worthless if our lives do not match our words.

The accompanying promise with this command is that we will be prosperous and successful in all that we do. “All right!” you may be thinking. “It’s easy street from here on in. I knew the Bible had to be practical for something.” Before you run out and buy a handful of tickets for this week’s lottery, let me point out that “success” in Hebrew does not refer to material success. Rather, it means to be prudent or to act circumspectly. It doesn’t mean that I will have the Midas touch, but it does mean that I will be successful in the tasks that God has called me to do.

Let me encourage you to reflect on your own life for a few minutes. Take out a sheet of paper and fold it in half to form two columns. At the top of one column, write the words, “Obstacle” “My Jordan.” At the top of the other column, write the words, “Obedience” “What God is calling me to do.” It should look like:

OBSTACLE
My Jordan

OBEDIENCE
What God is calling me to do

As you reflect on this, remember that God specializes in dry sandals. He loves to start with an impossible situation in your life . . . and then do the impossible. What obstacle lies in front of you? Where in your life is God waiting for you to take that first step of faith? Trust him for the unexpected, and let him surprise and delight you by doing the unexplainable! Take the first step in faith and then don’t be surprised if God parts the water and takes you through on dry land.

In 1991, I was introduced to the CoMission⁵ through my involvement as an instructor with Walk Thru the Bible. I participated in my first Russian convocation in September 1992 at the Black Sea. (The goal of the CoMission was to hold a convocation for each of the 150 school districts in the former Soviet Union, as well as countries in Eastern Europe such as Albania, Bulgaria, and Romania). Approximately 300 teachers attended the meeting. During the four-day convocation, we presented the teachers with a curriculum on Christian ethics and morality and taught them how to teach it in their schools. I'm still amazed at what we could do and the openness and receptivity of the teachers.

I returned in October 1993 with eleven others from my church to participate in another convocation trip. We held convocations in Murmansk and Tver with approximately 300 teachers attending in each city. Venetia was part of that team.

After a convocation had been held, the CoMission sent in a one-year follow-up team to continue to meet with and train the teachers in a particular city. Before we left on our trip, Venetia was beginning to pray as to whether or not to join one of those teams. Following the convocation, while she wasn't sure whether or not God wanted her on a team, she was convinced that he wanted her to at least start the process and apply.

She faced many fears—What about her job? Who would take care of her home? How would she raise the funds? What would her family and friends think? Would she be able to adjust to living in a different culture? What organization should she go out under? Would she be accepted?

Taking a deep breath, and convinced of God's leading, she took that first step of faith and filled out the paperwork and started the application process. Time does not

permit me to explain all the ways in which God parted the water to take her through on dry land. As a branch manager for a local bank, Venetia talked to her staff supervisor about what this would do to her career. Not only was her supervisor fully supportive and encouraging, she granted her a one-year leave of absence from her job. She could come back in one year with the same salary and benefits as when she left.

Another concern was what to do with her home while she was gone. She decided to put it on the market and try to sell. She was greatly encouraged when someone made an offer after only one week. However, a week later the offer was withdrawn. As time drew near for her to leave for Russia, it had not sold. Rather than be discouraged, she took it as an answer to prayer—"No." While she could not sell her home, she was able to find someone to housesit for a year.

Another fear was raising the necessary financial support. I told her several times that I thought she would be surprised at how quickly God provided for her. While I'm certainly not a prophet, her support was completely raised in less than three months. She even received pledges for more than she needed.

God had parted the waters and taken her through on dry land. Now a career missionary, Venetia spent ten years in Russia.

What challenge lies before you? What change is God making in your life? Where in your life is he waiting for you to take that first step of faith? Trust him for the unexpected, and like Venetia, let him surprise and delight you by doing the unexplainable. Take the first step in faith and don't be surprised if God parts the water and takes you through on dry land.

WHEN YOU FEEL OVERWHELMED BY THE PROSPECT OF CHANGE,

1. Since you cannot avoid change, anticipate the types of changes you may need to make.
2. Take the first step in faith . . . and then follow it with further steps of faith.
 - God will keep his promises.
 - God promises to be with us.
3. Be strong and courageous.
 - God promises we will be on the winning side.
 - God promises that he will be with us.
4. Become a student of God's Word.
 - We will be successful in the task God has called us to do.

QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU TURN ON THE NIGHT LIGHT

1. What changes do you anticipate you will need to face during the next 12 months?
How do you feel as you think about those changes?
2. How would practicing the principles found in this chapter help you ease through those transitions? Explain your answer.
- 3.

¹ Green, M. (1989). *Illustrations for biblical preaching*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, p. 37, #91.

² Ibid., p. 38, #92, cited in "No growth," *The American Spectator*, January 1984.

³ The NASB has a more accurate translation of this phrase since the verb is a command.

⁴ Wilkinson, B. H., Hoover, J. W., Kirk, P. A. (eds.). *Your daily walk*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991, p. 70.

⁵ The CoMission was a five-year strategy to impact the former Soviet Union through the public schools. The CoMission, which was made up of 75+ organizations and 100+ churches, were invited to help the people of the former Soviet Union rebuild their country on a foundation of Christian morality and ethics.