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Hope at the Duck's Breath Saloon

Sometimes change seems impossible. Stories abound about people who've tried all kinds of formulas, therapy, techniques, self-help books, and gimmicks to try to change something that's harmful in their life. And while these things might help for a while, most of these people fall back into their same old habits and patterns, and they just give up. Maybe that's your story. It's certainly been mine. I become aware of a flaw or destructive pattern, I ask God to help me overcome it, I gain control over it for a season, but then I slip back into old ways. In his book *I Really Want to Change... so Help Me God*, James MacDonald writes:

The number one reason we don't change is because at some time in the past we have attempted to change, and then failed, and in the process we get hurt and defeated. After trying a few times, we just give up. We conclude that the only pain worse than needing to change is trying to change and failing.¹ Larry Crabb, author and expert on spiritual change, once said, "I've been a follower of Jesus for over fifty years now, and I am appalled, after all these years, at how untransformed I really am."²

But the Bible promises that God can change a human life, and while change seems impossible, it's not. It's hard, it's a lifelong process, it's sometimes frustrating and painful, but it's not impossible.

Three years ago I met a man named Jim Grannen who thought change was impossible. Jim and his wife, Jeanie, were staying at the Black Forest Inn just a few doors down from Laurie and me in the Black Hills of South Dakota. When I first saw Jim, he had dismounted his Harley and was stroll-ing toward the deck where I was reading *Created to Be God's Friend* by Henry Blackaby. Jim sported a red bandana, blue jeans, ponytail, and a long, gray beard. He slowly made his way up the steps of the deck, sat down, and leaned back in a patio chair next to me. He lifted his black leather boots onto the wooden footrest, lit a cigarette, nodded my way, and said, "How ya doin'?" I covered the title to my book and thought, "If this guy finds out I'm a pastor, he'll flip."

I nodded his way and said, "Not bad. How you doin'?" No response.

I said, "You a part of the rally?" (Every year sixty thousand Harley bikers descend on Sturgis, South Dakota, in the Black Hills for the annual rally.)

He said in a thick southern drawl, "Yeah. Me and the wife come out every year."

I said, "Really. What's the attraction?"

He said, "Oh, you know-ride around, look ,look at the chrome."

I thought, "That's worth a trip to South Dakota every year?" But I said, "Sounds fun."

He said, "You ride?"

"I used to ride a Suzuki 185." He looked at me, smiled, then took a long drag on his cigarette as he looked out over the hills.

But I sensed there was something going on inside Jim, so the next morning I sat at his breakfast table and asked him if he'd tell me his story. He said, "Do you have an hour?" I said, "I'm in South Dakota." I pulled out my notepad and wrote down what Jim said:

I'm fifty-two years old, but September 9, 1980, was the day the best part of my life began. I came out of Vietnam a hard drinker and drug addict, and it was killin' me, killin' my wife, and killin' my two kids. And I knew it, but alcohol had a hold on me. I'd be drivin' home from work, it was a twenty-five-mile drive, and I had to fight the urge to stop at the bars. Night after night I'd fight it all the way to the last bar, but then I'd pull in and order a drink with tears in my eyes.

Sometimes you wake up in life and you don't know where you are, where you've been, or where you're going. I pulled over in the driving rain one night in my beat-up '74 Buick Skylark, and I had no idea where I was or where I was going. I lived in Atlanta, but I wound up in a jail in Macon, Georgia, with a DWI, and I didn't know how I got there.

In the meantime, Jeanie had joined Al-Anon and was get-tin' on with her life; she was gettin' healthy and that scared me to death. I was losing my wife-she'd kicked me out of the house. I was losing my life, I was running out of sick leave from work, but I couldn't stop myself.

I was on a binge that was impossible for me to shake, which brings me to September 9, 1980. That night I went to the Duck's Breath Saloon, where I had my final drink, because the next day I checked myself into the hospital.

And then Jim said words that blew me away. He said, "The next day, I stepped onto the rubber pad that opens the automatic doors to the hospital, and that was the moment. I didn't say 'God' or 'Jesus,' but that was the moment I gave my life to him. But after ten days of treatment, the hospital staff said I'd never make it and that I was a hopeless case."

Jim leaned across the table, looked me in the eye, and said, "Rehab and AA can help you get free from alcohol, but what really did it for me was Jesus. Without him, you can become free of alcohol, but you'll never have the joy and freedom that only Jesus brings. "Ibis Harbad

Today Jim's been free from alcohol for twenty-five years.

He works for Medical Doctor Associates as director of gov-ernment contracting and generates fifteen million dollars of business for his company annually. Jim is a changed man.

We Can Change

Maybe it's not an addiction to alcohol that's got a hold on you, but maybe it's depression, or guilt, or some secret habit. Maybe you feel numb, or passionless, or plain ol' blah. Maybe you're just drifting without any purpose or direction. Maybe you've never felt close to God. Maybe like Jim Grannen you woke up one day and didn't know where you were or how you got there, and you feel lost and alone. The great news is that if God can change a guy who staggered into a hospital and was told he'd never make it, God can change you. He can change me. There's hope at the Duck's Breath Saloon, and with God's help you and I can change whatever's broken inside of us and start a new life.

James 3:2 says, "We all stumble in many ways." That could be my life verse. I'm pretty sure I do or say something wrong every day. Some days I'm embarrassingly sinful. The reality is that even if we've begun a new life in Christ, we will still sin. We will still be angry, afraid, and selfish; we will still say things and do things that hurt people. Even if we're forgiven, there's still this gap between who we are and who we want to become. The good news is that's completely normal. The bad news is that closing the gap between the real and the ideal is a lifelong pursuit of growth that requires humility and discipline. But with God's help, you and I can change whatever is sin-ful, harmful, or broken in our lives. The Bible tells us repeatedly that we can change. Jim's story shows us that nobody's a hopeless case, the power of Christ to change people is real, and forgiveness and grace are available to any who ask for it. Forgiveness doesn't free us from some of the long-term scars and consequences that come from a careless past. But it gives us a new start with the possibility for a better future.

It's never too late to rebuild your life. The question is, how does change happen?

Look at what the Bible says about life change:

Do not copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. (Rom. 12:2 NLT)

Those who become Christ-followers become new people. They are not the same anymore. The old life is gone, a new life has come. (2 Cor. 5:17, author paraphrase)

He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Phil. 1:6)

The Bible tells us that God wants to transform, renew, and complete us, which means that transformation and change are fundamental themes in the Bible. The Bible wouldn't instruct us to change if change weren't possible. The goal isn't just salvation but transformation. The goal isn't just to get to heaven someday; the goal is to shed the old life and start living a new one long before heaven. Romans 12:2 says, "Let God transform you into a new person."

How Do We Change?

Whenever I talk about change, some people get nervous because they think they have to change their personality, or become a religious fanatic, or become someone they're not. I once interviewed actor Stephen Baldwin on our stage, and when I asked him about doing movies and playing some roles that were somewhat sketchy, I'll never forget what he said: "God doesn't want me to stop being Stephen Baldwin. He just wants me to stop sinning."

I love that! Being transformed doesn't mean you lose your personality or passions; it doesn't mean you become all religious, weird, or soft. I'm still nuts about hunting, golf, biking, canoeing, and fishing. I love watching sports and listening to country music. God doesn't want me to stop being Bob Merritt. He just wants me to stop sinning.

But how?

Change is rarely immediate; instead, it's a process. And it never really ends. There are starts and stops, progress and regress, but over time, as you practice better relating patterns and habits, you'll notice that you fail less and rebound quicker. The following four steps are crucial for lasting change to happen.

Let God

The Bible says, "Let God transform you." It doesn't say, "Let Dr. Phil's boot camp change you," or "Let Tony Robbins's power of positive thinking change you," or "Let

Oprah's 'spirit' change you." There's not a single person, program, book, or technique that can change your life. Your spouse can't change you; neither can your boss, mom, or therapist. You can't even change yourself. Only God can change a human life. Which means that practicing new habits or incorporating new disciplines can take you only so far. Ultimately, God is the only one who can change a human being and put that person on a new path.

Yet how many people run from fad to fad, to therapy, seminars, psychionly God can produce? In our newspaper business section awhile back, I read, "The Psychic Friends Network filed for bankruptcy." Their lawyer said, "Apparently they made some bad decisions due to unforeseen circumstances." Hello! Only God can change us into new people. But how often do we turn to God as a last resort? When all else has failed, maybe we give God a try.

Two weeks before Christmas our bathtub was clogged. In the past, I'd been able to fish out the slop with a makeshift hook and wire, but this time I'd only made it worse. I had pushed everything down the drain farther and farther. After battling for an hour, I finally went to the hardware store to get a snake, because there's no way Liquid Drano would work-that's all advertising hype. So I bought a middle-of-the-road-quality snake for fifteen dollars, sped back home, and ran the snake down the hole. Turns out the snake was the wrong style, but the label says you can't exchange it because of sanitary reasons. I was sitting there in the tub, and I almost said a bad word, but it was close to Christmas, so I controlled myself, I think.

I drove back to the hardware store, bought a new and improved snake, but I could not unclog the drain. Finally, after several hours of frustration and losing my cool, after thirty-five dollars down the same drain, Laurie said, "Maybe Liquid Drano would work."

I said, "No way. But if you want to pick some up the next time you're out, go ahead. What can it hurt?"

Only God can change a human life.

That stuff is like the Holy Spirit of God. It goes down the drain, sees where the grime is, and goes right to work. Without any effort on my part, Liquid Drano does what I'm incapable of doing: it clears the pipes and cleans up the mess. And this is so typical. I try to change whatever's wrong in my life, and only after I've messed it all up do I re-alize, "There's nothing I can do about this. I need to rely on the miracle-working power of Liquid Drano; I need a power hat's beyond me." (I've since learned that a plunger does the job better than anything.)

And notice that we have to let God do it. The Bible says, "Let God transform you into a new person." God doesn't force us to change; we have to let him, which means we have to surrender our control to him.

Jim Grannen said, "I didn't say 'God' or 'Jesus,' but that was the moment I gave my life to him." Jim came to a place where he knew he needed Jesus-not church, not another person or program, but Jesus. Unless you can point to a moment or time when you turned to Jesus and asked him to enter your life, it'll be impossible for you to change. Paul described it this way in Galatians 2:20: "I now live my earthly life by trusting in Jesus" (author paraphrase).

Some of you may need to do that for the very first time. Jesus told us in Revelation 3:20 that he stands at the door of our heart knocking, and if we let him in, he will come in and start a new relationship that brings forgiveness, healing, and joy. Jesus never forces his way into someone's life; he stands outside knocking. You may have sensed him knocking from time to time, but maybe you've never invited Jesus to save you. Maybe you've never put your trust in him.

Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). If you sense that something is missing, if you keep making the same mistakes over and over again and nothing ever changes, the first step is to invite Jesus Christ into your life so that he can forgive you and start cleaning out whatever has you stuck.

And that can be scary, because when you begin to let God change you, he will show you things in your life that are clog-ging the drain. I don't know if you've ever seen the black, smelly sludge that clogs drains, but it's nasty. It's painful to look at. But until that sin is forgiven and cleaned out, you will be stuck in the same old patterns. And some of that stuff's been down there for years-anger, resentment, greed, lust, sexual misconduct, self-pity, deception, envy, pettiness, arrogance. But change can't happen until we invite God into our lives and let him clean out the darkness.

Why should you do it? Why should you open yourself up to letting God change you? If you don't let God change what-ever's wrong and destructive in your life, you will experience ongoing decay and death. Galatians 6:7-8 says, "Don't be misled. Remember, you can't ignore God and get away with it. Those who live according to their own sinful desires will harvest the consequences of decay and death" (author para-phrase). Letting God clean out the sin in my life is scary, but what's scarier is living with the same old habits and patterns that could wreck my marriage, destroy my kids, harm my friendships, tank my career, and waste my potential, causing me to miss out on the life God has planned for me.

So if you're not seeing anything change in your life, the question has to be asked: have you ever invited Jesus in to forgive, cleanse, and change you? Because it's impossible to change without God in your life. "Let God change you into a new person."

Identify Your Specific Sins

For change to happen, we have to be honest about and identify specific sins that hinder progress. James MacDonald writes, "If you're serious about transformation you must be willing to ask God what specific thing he wants to change in you. Until you get specific, transformation will be a pipedream."

So here's my question: can you name the specific sin, habit, pattern, attitude, or behavior that is damaging to you and others? What specific thing does God want to change in you? If you're having trouble thinking of it, then ask your spouse, they'll be glad to tell you. Ask your friends or co-workers; ask your kids.

Several years ago I was preparing a message for Easter, and so I was thinking about what sin I needed to give up for Lent. I thought, "Why not ask my kids?" I have found this to be a good but sobering practice. You might get some feedback that's difficult to hear, but it could save you some grief down the road.

We were sitting around the table, so I looked over at Dave, who was slurping down some potato soup—he was ten at the time. I said, "So, Dave, what sin do I have in my life that I need to get rid of?"

He looked up at me, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and said, "Sin, Dad? Isn't it more like sins?"

I said, "Whatever."

He said, "Your temper." (This was before Fred.)

I said, "Really?"

He said, "Yeah, sometimes you lose it, like the time you grabbed my shirt and yelled at me. And how about the time you..."

I said, "Okay, okay, I'll try to work on that."

Meg was sitting over there chomping at the bit. "Bad words," she said.

I said, "What do you mean bad words?"

"Like the time we were in the car and you were in a hurry; you said a bad word, Dad."

I said, "You're right—occasionally I let one slip. I'll try to work on that."

I thought they were done, but they were just warming up.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore, so I turned the discussion away from me and said, "What about your mother?" which wasn't smart.

Laurie said, "Don't drag me into this; you have enough sins to keep us talking all afternoon."

The point is that you and I can't work on changing some-thing we can't see or don't think is a problem. How can you overcome anger if you don't see that it's a problem, or al-coholism, or materialism, or lust, or bitterness, or a critical spirit? The second step to changing is to identify the spe-cific sins God wants to rid us of and admit that they're a problem.

Starve Your Old Life and Feed Your New Life

Once you've identified the specific sins you want to over-come, the third step is to starve your old life and feed your new one. In other words, you need to start making wiser choices about the people, places, and circumstances that draw you into your areas of weakness.

The Bible tells us that when we invite Jesus into our lives, the Holy Spirit of God takes up residence inside us and never leaves us. We still have what the Bible calls a "sinful human nature" that continues to pull us toward destructive desires and behaviors, but the Holy Spirit gives us a new power to overcome those things. Essentially, we have two natures living inside us, the old sinful nature and the new spiritual nature. Which is why the Bible instructs us to "walk in the Spirit," "be led by the Spirit," and "submit to the Spirit's control." We have to make a daily choice either to allow our sinful nature to control us or to let God's Spirit control us. Romans 8:9 says, "You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you." It's a matter of what we allow to take control of our lives. We need to starve the old life and feed the new.

Dr. Stewart Briscoe used to tell a story about the English bird called the cuckoo. It's a very large bird, but it never lays its eggs in its own nest because it never builds its own nest. It finds a nest with other eggs in it, waits until mother thrush goes away, lands, and lays its own eggs. Now you have two natures in one nest-cuckoo nature and thrush nature. Mrs. Thrush comes back, all the eggs hatch, she thinks things are a bit strange, but she goes ahead anyway. She comes back with a fat worm. One cavernous cuckoo mouth opens to greet her, and four petite thrush mouths open; two natures in one nest. One nature gets fed because the big cuckoo mouth gobbles up all the worms, and the little thrush mouths get nothing. As time goes by, the baby cuckoo grows and grows until he kicks out the baby thrushes. The nature you feed grows; the

nature you starve dies.

In Romans, Paul says that if you go on pursuing the old life, feeding the old life, and hanging around the old life, it's obvious what's going to happen. The old life will continue to grow, and you will be controlled by and motivated by your sinful human nature. You'll starve God out, and you'll be forever hounded by your old habits, patterns, and sin. And change will elude you. For change to happen, you have to starve the old life and feed the new.

Once you invite Jesus into your life, that's just the begin-ning. Now you need to feed your new life by praying daily, reading inspirational Christian books, spending time with spiritually mature people who will help you grow, and finding a healthy place of worship. Nobody can do those things for you. You are responsible for your own spiritual growth and strength. There are a lot of defeated people whose lives haven't changed much because instead of feeding their new life with daily spiritual nutrition, they're starving it out with neglect and atrophy. Starve the old life and start feeding the new.

Begin a Lifelong Pursuit of God

Change is not an immediate event; it's a lifelong process. And the goal is not perfection but progress. Perfection is impossible, so we should stop expecting it. What we hope for is progress. As I've studied the area of transformation, I've learned that while God is capable of bringing about instantaneous, miraculous transformation, usually it's not an immediate event where you become a brand-new person who no longer struggles with temptation and sin.

Philippians 2:12 says to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling." In other words, there's a difference between salvation and transformation. Salvation happens the moment you put your trust in Jesus and ask him to come into your life; transformation is a lifelong process of becoming more like Jesus in how you live and love. Many people mistakenly think that once they put their trust in Jesus and become saved from their sins, all their problems will go away and they'll no longer be bothered by sin. Not true. Salvation is simply the beginning of the lifelong process of growth.

The Bible says work out your salvation, not work for your salvation. Now that you're saved, work it out. Work out your weaknesses, work out your behavior, work out your attitudes, work out your temptation areas. Inviting Jesus into your life saves you from sin, but it doesn't cure you from sinning. Now that you're saved, work it out. You didn't become an addict overnight; you worked long and hard at it. It's going to take some time, maybe the rest of your life, to work it out. You didn't develop an angry

spirit overnight; some of you watched your dad or mom model that for years. It's going to take some time to work that out of your life. It took years to develop a sharp tongue, but now that you're saved, work it out; bite your tongue and clean up your language. Instead of saying, "What's wrong with you, you idiot?" practice new phrases like, "Maybe I misunderstood you" or "I wonder if we could talk about this." I have to work every day on my choice of words and tone of voice. Old habits die hard, but with God's help, they can die and you can change.

One of the ways to work out your salvation is to commit to a lifelong pursuit of God. The psalmist David said, "I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free" (Ps. 119:32). His heart is set free by pursuing God and running toward his commands. This is a key element to lasting change. When you are running in pursuit of God, you tend to run away from your old, sinful ways. Galatians 5:16 says, "I advise you to live according to your new life in the Holy Spirit. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves" (NLT). If you're pursuing God by making time for regular worship, incorporating a regular time of reading and praying, spending more time with good people, and finding ways to serve God with your talents and resources, you won't have the time or the desire to keep pursuing the old life. Paul says, "You won't be doing what the sinful nature craves." In fact, he concludes, "The Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires" (Gal. 5:17 NLT). New desires like love, joy, peace, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, purity, and self-control—all of the elements that make for a better life.

What are you pursuing these days? What consumes the lion's share of your thinking and doing? Appetites are developed for things you pursue, and the moment you commit to a lifelong and daily pursuit of God, you'll begin to see changes for the good.

The Sign of Change

How can you tell if true change has begun? Look at your relationships, because spiritual progress is always measured by the condition of our relationships. Are you quick to admit when you're wrong? Are you willing to forgive? Are you tender and kind? Do you smile at people? Do you enjoy people? Do you ever get notes from people thanking you for your kindness, generosity, or time? How are your relationships?

I've always taught that love is not a feeling; it's an action. Loving people means that I behave in loving ways toward them by forgiving them, being patient and kind toward them, overlooking faults in them, and being generous toward them. I have never felt like forgiving someone. Forgiveness is an act of love, a choice of the will. So I have often said, even from the platform, that the Bible commands us to love one another,

but it never commands us to like one another. Thank God for that! Thank God I don't have to like everybody, because that would be impossible. Love is an action; like is a feeling. So I can forgive you (love), but I don't have to like you; I can be patient with you (love), but I don't have to like you.

But then I came across a verse in Romans 12 that says, "Don't just pretend to love others, really love them. Love each other with genuine affection" (v. 9, author paraphrase). Now that's a problem, because affection is sort of like a feeling, and feelings mess with my theology. But here's what I've been learning, and this has been a huge revelation to me: I have been withholding my feelings for people. I have been hiding behind the "I can love them, but I don't have to like them" idea. I have been excusing myself from having to like people, and consequently, my affections haven't had a chance to grow.

But God has convicted me on this, so have a few board members, staff members, family members, friends, Fred, and just about anyone who knows me. And they've challenged me to express my feelings and allow myself to get close to people. So I've tried to do that, and it's amazing. Every once in a while now I'll feel something, and it's like, "Ooh, I think that was a genuine affection." I'll catch myself smiling with people and looking forward to certain conversations and meetings. I'll never be a warm, fuzzy teddy bear. But I can tell you that having genuine affection for people is a good thing, it's a healing thing, and it's brought a whole new di-mension to my life.

The best part of going to work these days is the people who are now becoming my best friends. I see other staff members sequester themselves in their offices like I used to do, and they're missing it; they're missing the best part of life. I can't believe I spent more than twenty years of my life missing out on the best part of life—friendship, laughter, and genuine love. Spiritual progress is not measured by how much you know or how long you can pray. Spiritual progress is always measured by the quality of your relationships. If you want to know if you are growing spiritually, look at your relationships. Are people an annoyance to you, or are you starting to love them "with genuine affection"?

Quicker to Apologize

A few months ago, a colleague came to me behind stage where I was prepping to speak, and she said that the visual aid I had requested on stage would be impossible to do. We were under a lot of pressure, so in the heat of the moment I said, "I don't want to hear what's impossible right now. I want to hear what's possible." As soon as I said it, I knew I had crossed a relational line. She gently pushed back, but I pushed

back harder. I said, "Look, telling me what's impossible does me no good; go back and try to figure out what's possible." I could see in her face that I had inflicted a small wound on her heart.

Fortunately, God's Holy Spirit, who lives within me, made me miserable and convicted me of my sin and wouldn't let me dismiss it. That's one of the signs of growth, by the way-when you sin and it nags at you. So twenty minutes later I sought her out and said, "I want to apologize for my anger back there. I hate it when I do that. Will you forgive me?" You know what she did? She smiled and said, "Thanks for building a bridge," and our friendship was restored. I never would have done that ten years ago. I would've blamed her and just let the chips fall. So I'm not perfect, but there's progress. I'm closing the gap between who I am and who I want to be, and that's a good sign.

The sad truth about me is that I still sin. I still think, say, and do things that make me wonder if I'll ever become the person God created me to be. Some of you may be thinking, "Bob, I want to change, but will I ever be able to treat my children the way I want to? Will I ever be able to stop hating my co-worker, classmate, ex-spouse, father, mother, brother, or sister? Will I ever be able to stop my inner rage? Will I ever be able to control my tongue? Will I ever stop trying to compete with my friend's looks, wealth, house, kids, or cars? Will I ever feel close to God? Will I ever be able to overcome my secret sin or awful habit?" The answer is yes. With God's help, you can gain victory over whatever is out of control in your life. You'll never be perfect, and you'll often slip back into old patterns, but Jesus once said, "What is impossible for people is possible with God" (Luke 18:27 NLT).

What in your life seems impossible? Jim Grannen was an impossible case, with an impossible addiction, impossible marriage, and impossible future. He didn't say the words "God" or "Jesus," but there was a moment when Jim gave his life to him. And that was the moment his new life began.

If you've had a true conversion where you've invited Jesus into your life; and if you get serious about confessing your specific sins to God, yourself, and others; if you starve your old life and feed your new one; if you develop a lifelong pursuit of God, you're going to start to change for the good. You're going to see glimmers of hope and small steps of progress. Will you fail? Yes. But you'll begin to recognize the failure quicker and confess it sooner. And true change will always show up in your relationships.