

The Source of a Changed Life

Have you ever found yourself saying, "I hate my life"? How can a person experience true life change? Positive change?

By Josh McDowell

I longed to be happy. I wanted to be one of the happiest people in the entire world. I also desired meaning in life. I was looking for answers to the questions:

"Who am I?"

"Why in the world am I here?"

"Where am I going?"



More than that, I also longed to be free. I wanted to be one of the freest people in the whole world. Freedom to me was not simply doing what you want to do--anyone can do that. Freedom, for me, meant having the power to do what you know you ought to do. Most people know what they ought to do but don't have the power to do it. So I started looking for answers.

Where can one find positive change?

It seemed that almost everyone was into some sort of religion, so I did the obvious thing and went to church. I must have hit the wrong church, though, because it only made me feel worse. I went to church morning, noon and night, but it didn't help. I'm very practical, and when something doesn't work, I chuck it. So, I gave up religion.

I began to wonder if prestige was the answer. Being a leader, accepting some cause, giving yourself to it, and being popular might do it, I thought. At the university I attended, the student leaders held the purse strings and threw their weight around. So I ran for an influential position and got elected. It was great having everyone know me, making the decisions, and spending the university's money to get speakers I wanted. It was great, but it wore off like everything else I had tried. I would wake up Monday morning (usually with a headache because of the night before) and my attitude was, "Well, here goes another five days." I endured Monday through Friday. Happiness revolved around three nights a week--Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Then the vicious cycle began all over again.

Seeking life change, positive change

I suspect that few people in the universities and colleges at the time were more sincere about trying to find meaning, truth, and purpose in life than I was.

During that period I noticed a small group of people--eight students and two faculty members. There was something different about their lives. They seemed to know why they believed what they believed. They also seemed to know where they were going.

The people I began to notice didn't just talk about love--they got involved. They seemed to be riding above the circumstances of university life. While everyone else seemed under the pile, they appeared to have a content, peaceful state about them that wasn't driven by circumstances. They appeared to possess an inner, constant source of joy. They were disgustingly happy. They had something I didn't have.

Like the average student, when somebody had something I didn't have, I wanted it. So, I decided to make friends with these intriguing people. Two weeks after that decision we were all sitting around a table in the student union--six students and two faculty members. The conversation started to get around to God.

Asking about life change, positive change

They were bothering me, so finally I looked over at one of the students, a good-looking woman (I used to think all Christians were ugly); and I leaned back in my chair (I didn't want the others to think I was interested) and I said, "Tell me, what changed your lives? Why are your lives so different from the others on campus?"

That young woman must have had a lot of conviction. She looked me straight in the eye and said two words I never thought I'd hear as part of a solution in a university: "Jesus Christ."

I said, "Oh, for God's sake, don't give me that garbage. I'm fed up with religion. I'm fed up with the church. I'm fed up with the Bible. Don't give me that garbage about religion."

She shot back, "Hey, I didn't say religion, I said Jesus Christ." She pointed out something I'd never known before: Christianity is not a religion. Religion is when human beings try to work their way to God through good works; Christianity is God coming to men and women through Jesus Christ to offer a relationship with himself.

There are probably more people in universities with misconceptions about Christianity than anywhere else in the world. Some time ago I met a teaching assistant who remarked in a graduate seminar that "anyone who walks into a church becomes a Christian." I replied, "Does walking into a garage make you a car?" I'd been told that a Christian is somebody who genuinely believes in Christ.

As I considered Christianity, my new friends challenged me intellectually to examine Jesus' life. I found out that Buddha, Mohammed and Confucius never claimed to be God, but Jesus did. My friends asked me to look over the evidence for Jesus' deity. They were convinced that Jesus was God in human form who died on the cross for the sins of mankind, that he was buried, that he arose three days later, and that he could change a person's life today.

I thought this was a farce. In fact, I thought most Christians were walking idiots. I'd met some. I used to wait for a Christian to speak up in the classroom so I could tear him or her up one side and down the other, and beat the professor to the punch. I imagined that if a Christian had a brain cell it would die of loneliness. I didn't know any better.

But these people challenged me over and over. Finally, I accepted their challenge. I did it out of pride to refute them, thinking there were no facts. I assumed there wasn't any evidence a person could evaluate.

After many months of study, my mind came to the conclusion that Jesus Christ must have been who he claimed to be. That presented quite a problem. My mind told me all this was true but my will was pulling me in another direction.

I discovered that becoming a Christian was rather ego-shattering. Jesus Christ made a direct challenge to my will to trust him. I didn't care if Christ did walk on water or turn water into wine, I didn't want any party-pooper around. I couldn't think of a faster way to ruin a good time. So here my mind was telling me Christianity was true and my will was running away.

More aware that I hate my life

Whenever I was around those enthusiastic Christians, the conflict would begin. If you've ever been around happy people when you're miserable, you understand how they can bug you. They would be so happy and I would be so miserable that I'd literally get up and run right out of the student union. It came to the point where I'd go to bed at ten at night, and I wouldn't get to sleep until four in the morning. I knew I had to get it off my mind before I went out of my mind! Finally my head and my heart connected on December 19, 1959, at 8:30 p.m. during my second year at the university--I became a Christian.

That night I prayed four things to establish a relationship with Jesus Christ which has since transformed my life. First, I said, "Lord Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross for me." Second, I said, "I confess those things in my life that aren't pleasing to you and ask you to forgive me and cleanse me." Third, I said, "Right now, in the best way I know how, I open the door of my heart and life and trust you as my Savior and Lord. Take control of my life. Change me from the inside out. Make me the type of person you created me to be." The last thing I prayed was, "Thank you for coming into my life by faith." It was a faith based not upon ignorance but upon the evidence of history and God's Word.

I'm sure you've heard various religious people talking about their personal bolt-of-lightning experience. Well, after I prayed, nothing happened. I mean nothing. And I still didn't sprout wings. In fact, after I made that decision, I felt worse. I literally felt I was going to vomit. Oh, no, I thought, what did you get sucked into now? I really felt I'd gone off the deep end (and I'm sure some people think I did!).

God and life change, positive change

But in six months to a year-and-a-half, I found out that I hadn't gone off the deep end. My life was changed. I was once in a debate with the head of the history department at a university, and I said my life had been changed. He interrupted me with "McDowell, are you trying to tell us that God really changed your life in the 20th century? What areas?" After 45 minutes he said, "OK, that's enough." Let me tell you a few of the things I told him and the audience that day.

One area God changed was my restlessness. I always had to be occupied. I'd walk across the campus and my mind was like a whirlwind with conflicts bouncing around the walls. I'd sit down and try to study, but I couldn't. A few months after I made that decision for Christ, a kind of mental peace developed. Don't misunderstand. I'm not talking about the absence of conflict. What I found in this relationship with Jesus wasn't absence of conflict but the ability to cope with it. I wouldn't trade that for anything in the world.

Another area that started to change was my bad temper. I used to blow my stack if somebody just looked at me cross-eyed. I still have the scars from almost killing a guy my first year at college. My temper was such a part of me that I didn't try to consciously change it. I arrived at the crisis of losing my temper only to find it was gone! Only once in 14 years have I exploded (and when I blew it that time, I made up for it for about six years!).

Positive change on hatred

There's another area of which I'm not proud. But I mention it because a lot of people need to have the same change in their lives, and I found the source of change: a relationship with Jesus Christ. That area is hatred. I had a lot of hatred in my life. It wasn't something outwardly manifested, but there was a kind of inward grinding. I was ticked off with people, with things, with issues.

But I hated one man more than anyone else in the world: my father. I hated his guts. To me he was the town alcoholic. Everybody knew my dad was a drunk. My friends would make jokes about my father staggering around downtown. They didn't think it bothered me. I was like other people--laughing on the outside. But let me tell you, I was crying on the inside. There were times I'd go out in the barn and see my mother beaten so badly she couldn't get up, lying in the manure behind the cows. When we had friends over, I would take my father out, tie him up in the barn, and park the car around the silo. We would tell our friends he'd had to go somewhere. I don't think anyone could have hated anyone more than I hated my father.

After I made that decision for Christ, he entered my life and his love was so strong that he took the hatred and turned it upside down. I was able to look my father squarely in the eyes and say, "Dad, I love you." And I really meant it. After some of the things I'd done, that shook him up.

When I transferred to a private university I was in a serious car accident. With my neck in traction, I was taken home. I'll never forget my father coming into my room. He asked me, "Son, how can you love a father like me?" I said, "Dad, six months ago I despised you." Then I shared with my dad the conclusions I had come to about Christ: "Dad, I let Jesus Christ come into my life. I can't explain it completely, but as a result of that relationship I've found the capacity to love and accept not only you but other people just the way they are."

Forty-five minutes later one of the greatest thrills of my life occurred. Somebody in my own family, someone who knew me so well I couldn't pull the wool over his eyes, said to me, "Son, if God can do in my life what I've seen him do in yours, then I want to give him the opportunity." Right there my father prayed with me and trusted Christ for the forgiveness of his sins.

Usually the changes take place over several days, weeks, months, or even a year. The life of my father was changed right before my eyes. It was as if somebody reached down and turned on a light bulb. I've never seen such a rapid change before or since. My father touched whiskey only once after that. He got it as far as his lips and that was it. I've come to one conclusion. A relationship with Jesus Christ changes lives.

The Life change, positive change

You can laugh at Christianity. You can mock and ridicule it. But it works. It changes lives. If you trust Christ, start watching your attitudes and actions because Jesus Christ is in the business of changing lives.

But Christianity is not something you can shove down somebody's throat. All I can do is tell you what I've learned. After that, it's your decision.

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