
The Unchanging Christ

John Charles Ryle

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JOHN CHARLES RYLE

John Charles Ryle (1816-1900) was educated at Eton and at Christ Church, Oxford, where his career was unusually distinguished.

His first serious conviction came soon after he left Eton when his friend, Algernon Coote, rebuked him for swearing. Two years went by. Then in midsummer 1837, not long before his final examinations, he fell ill with severe chest inflammation. "That was the time," he wrote, "when I distinctly remember that I began to read my Bible and pray." He entered church one Sunday after the service had begun. Ephesians 2:8-9 was read and applied to his soul with particular emphasis. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast." In due time, Ryle came to love the doctrines of free grace.

Ryle became curate of Exbury, Hampshire, 1841; rector of St. Thomas, Winchester, 1843; of Helmingham, Suffolk, 1844; vicar of Stradbroke, Suffolk, 1861; rural dean of Hoxne, 1869; honorary canon of Norwich, 1872; select preacher at Cambridge, 1873-74; at Oxford, 1874-76, 1879, 1880; dean designate of Salisbury, 1880; and bishop of Liverpool, 1880-1900.

Ryle marked out a conservative Calvinistic path for evangelical churchmen in days when much of the Church of England was drifting on the tides of liberalism or tractarianism. His successor at Liverpool, F.J. Chavasse, summed him up strikingly: "A man of granite with the heart of a child."

The Unchanging Christ

“Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.” —Hebrews 13:8

Always the same, unchanging—that is a glorious character; a character which belongs to nothing that is of the earth earthy; a character which He alone deserves who is the Lord from heaven.

What of this very world in which we live and move and have our being? It has stamped upon it the marks of a tremendous change; it is no longer the same as it was in the beginning. It cannot be that fair creation of which God pronounced every part and portion to be very good. Doubtless we are not ignorant: it is still a beautiful world, clothed with all that is lovely to the eye, furnished with all that is necessary to our comfort, stored with everything that can make life enjoyable. You

may see everywhere the traces of a Father's hand. But still, we repeat, this world is not what it once was: it is no longer the same—no more the same than the gallant ship which yesterday did walk the waters like a thing of life, and today is dashed high on the beach and lies there a wreck, dismasted, shattered, and forsaken—no more the same than the ruin of some ancient house of God, which in days gone by was set apart and hallowed for religious services, and now stands desolate and silent and alone, with weeds and briars creeping over its floor, and ivy hanging about its broken walls like a widow's garment. Just so this world has gone through a blighting, withering change; and therefore it is we see so much of lusts unbridled and tempers ungoverned and passions unrestrained and intellects degraded and affections misplaced and powers misapplied, and God neglected, dishonored, and lightly esteemed. The sicknesses which devour their thousands, and the

wars which cut off their tens of thousands, and the graves of infants snatched away in the springtime of life, and the tears and distresses and troubles and sorrows and afflictions which God never placed in Eden, but of which we now hear continually—all these tell you the same tale. The world is no longer the same. All these are the handwriting on the wall to remind us that man, like an unfaithful steward, has marred and spoiled his Maker's handiwork by his own sin, and so put the creation out of order and course.

But we have not time, beloved, to compare earth as it is with earth as it was before Adam fell; it is enough to know that by his transgression all things suffered, for after his transgression all things were altered. We would rather go on to set before you proofs which are more under your own eyes and come within your own observation. We wish you to feel the full force and blessedness of the character St. Paul has given to your Lord and Savior in

our text; and in order to this we think it of first importance to establish in your minds this grand point—that there is nothing on earth of which you can say it is unchangeable, it is always the same, yesterday, today, and forever.

First, then, we ask you to mark that the empires and kingdoms of this world do not continue the same: all the victories which mighty conquerors have won, all the blood which they have spilt to cement and make firm their thrones, all the gold and treasure they have heaped together, all the territory they have brought under their authority, all the laws they have carefully framed for their subjects, have never availed to build up one single kingdom that has stood firm and undestroyed.

Some have endured for a longer space than others—some have appeared likely to remain until the end of time—but sooner or later all have wasted away, their strength has gone from them, they have

decayed and passed by, and their place is no more found.

Where are the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, whose power and magnificence we read of in the books of Kings and Chronicles? Armies like the sand of the sea for multitude, gold and silver abundant beyond even our conceptions—who would have thought such greatness would come to nothing? But Judah and Israel could not bear prosperity; they did not live up to their privileges. They provoked God by their wickedness, and so the chosen land became a desert, and Jerusalem itself was given to be burned, and, notwithstanding all their wealth and power, no sooner did the Lord touch them than they fell.

And where, too, are those mighty nations whose names so often meet our eyes in searching the Old Testament Scriptures—Nineveh and Babylon and Egypt? Time was when they had all the world at their feet, they ruled over countless people and tongues, and none could stand before

them; and yet one after the other they were overthrown and melted away. God used them as instruments to punish and chastise His faithless people, but after they had done His work He did not forget to reckon with them for their own sins. And, with all their pomp, splendor, and majesty, no sooner did He put forth His hand and touch them than they too consumed away and fell. The very cities where their kings reigned are no more, their palaces are leveled with the dust, their lofty walls which were their pride are utterly broken down: Nineveh, that exceeding great city, has been so completely destroyed that the exact spot where she once stood is no longer known; and Babylon, the wonder of the world, the hammer of the whole earth, has become, as Jeremiah foretold, "a desolation, a dry land, and a wilderness, a land wherein no man dwelleth, neither doth any son of man pass thereby" (Jer. 51:43).

O beloved, man in his best estate is altogether vanity; the works of his hands

are, like himself, frail and short-lived and perishable and ready to fade away. With all his boasted wisdom he can make nothing lasting; he cannot secure his handiwork against change. The oldest dominion in Europe is, so to speak, only of yesterday; and who knows whether there may be a worm at the heart of the strongest empire on earth, and in a few short years she too may be gone?

But again, we ask you to mark that even churches do not continue the same. Alas, there is only too much evidence that they too may fall to pieces and decay. Where are the churches whose faith and patience and love and zeal shine forth so brightly in the Acts and Epistles of the New Testament? Where is the church of Antioch and the church of Ephesus, the church of Philippi and the church of Berea, the church of Thessalonica and the church of Corinth—those holy communions which once brought such glory and praise to God, whose obedience was spoken of

throughout the world, whose children were ready to shed their blood for the gospel's sake? They are gone, they are dead, they are fallen; they kept not their first estate. They became high-minded and puffed up with self-conceit; they did not persevere in well doing, they did not abound in the fruits of righteousness; and so the Lord who had grafted them in also cut them off like withered and useless branches—and if anything can be said to remain of them, it is but the wreck and remnant of what they once were. Doubtless, beloved, there are promises belonging to Christ's church generally—the gates of hell shall not prevail against it; the Lord will never leave Himself without a witness—but there is no assurance that the church of any particular place or nation shall abide unchanged, except she continue faithful. Take any church on earth, the most renowned for wisdom, the most famous for age, the most apostolic in her government; we are bold to tell you if that

church is unfaithful to the Bridegroom Christ Jesus, if she does not hold forth the light of the pure gospel, if she leaves her first love, if she suffers false prophets to teach and seduce, if she becomes lukewarm and says, "I am rich and increased with goods" (Rev. 3:17), if she rests content with having a name to live while she is dead and plumes herself on keeping hold of the truth while she does not witness to it—we are bold to tell you, however long God's mercy may spare her, her candlestick shall sooner or later be removed, for we know this fearful threat has been over and over again made good.

Yes, even we have reason to watch and to pray and to be humble and fear. The fine gold may become dim; no home is so strong that if the servants sleep it may be broken up; no church is so well ordered that through the sin and faithlessness of her members she may be overturned. The Lord Himself once gave the pattern of His temple, but when the Jews who kept it

turned their own way and did not repent, when they thought only of a form of godliness and despised the power, that very temple was delivered over to be destroyed, and of all His beautiful stones not one was left upon another.

But we desire to bring this matter nearer home to yourselves. Have you not ever observed that men's circumstances are always changing—they are never long the same? Few indeed are those who have not learned this by bitter experience. Some begin life with every prospect of earthly prosperity, and before they have reached their prime their riches seem to have melted away and are scattered like the leaves in autumn, and they find themselves stripped of their possessions. Others, who know not what it is to want, are smitten with some sore disease, they have no power to enjoy the fortune God has given them, and often, when ready to cry in the evening, "Would God it were morning," and in the morning, "Would God it were

evening" (Deut. 28:67), when faint and weary and cast down with pain, they would give all their riches for a little health and think it cheaply purchased. Others with bodily strength and store of worldly goods are bereaved of friends by death or separation: the advisers of their youth, the comforters of their sorrows, the companions of their joys, are one after the other taken from them; year after year their beloved ones, with whom they have taken sweet counsel, and who were as their own souls, are all cut down or removed until at length they stand alone like the last tree of the forest.

Remember, I say that this is good. It is well for us that we are constrained to drink the bitter cup of affliction; it is the rod by which many are brought home to Christ—none are in such fearful peril as those who have never known a cross. But judge whether it is not true that our own life is full of changes; that man is a poor, frail, perishable creature, and never con-

tinues long in one place; there is nothing about his earthly condition certain and fixed and immovable and sure. We never know, when we part from those that are dear to us, that we shall meet again: we know not what alterations time may work before we once more meet face to face, before hand grasps hand and we again take sweet counsel about our common faith and our hopes of heaven. We may part rejoicing and meet sorrowing, part with laughter and meet with tears, part with many around us and meet with few: strange if we part and meet the same!

Oh, changing, changing world! Miserable indeed are they who look upon it as an abiding habitation, who think themselves anything but strangers, who give to anything but heaven the name of home.

Look at men's minds. They are not always the same. The intellect of the prudent statesman, the talent of the eloquent orator—these are not proof against decay. The mind of man is a beautiful thing, by

nature, when trained and educated and polished as it may be. But often we see that mind become a mere wreck. The eyes become dim and the natural force abates; the memory fails, the senses are deadened. We see all the weakness of childhood without its playfulness and light heart. This is a grief, and one more proof that we are not always the same.

Look at men's affections. They are not always the same: they may be warm and strong for a season, but even they cool. Often time and absence and the world cause strangeness and coldness between spirit and spirit, bitter and painful to bear but it must be borne. Business and new ties and new residence and new relations nip off old friendships. Our changing affections are one more proof that nothing remains always the same.

Onwards, onwards we are all moving: there is no standing still. The infant will soon be a boy, and the boy a man, and the man will find gray hairs upon him long be-

fore he expects, and the grave will be ready for him probably before he is ready for it. Men plant and build and labor and toil and plan and contrive, and often do not see their schemes completed. For we never know what is before us—what tomorrow may bring forth; it may be, as the marriage service beautifully teaches, better or worse, richer or poorer, sickness or health; we may find in our path towards Zion sweet flowers, but far more likely thistles and thorns; we may have some season of sunshine, but far more often darkness and clouds; but still, whatever happens, we are rolling onward towards the end, and this we may be sure of: we shall never be long without some change. We shall never find our state is long the same; tomorrow and yesterday may be widely different.

Once more: the holiest saints of God are not always the same. We have no fear that their names will ever be blotted from the Lamb's Book of Life; but we believe their hearts are often filled with shame and con-

fusion because of their own shortcomings and unsteady walk with God. Show me one single servant of the Lord in Scripture who did not at some time err and stumble in his course, who did not by his inconsistency or sin give occasion to the Lord's enemies to blaspheme. Oh, even the best of men have given melancholy proof that so long as we are in the body we are liable to change. We venture to assert there is not one in the white-robed company of the redeemed who would tell you he had always held on his way without wavering, always fought an equally good fight. All could remember that at his best there were days of spiritual sloth and drowsiness, days of unholy and unchristlike tempers, days of vanity and self-conceit, days of self-indulgence and conformity to this world, days of coldness and want of love—and each the cause of pain and sorrow and self-abasement.

Away with the idea of a sinless perfection on earth! We are bound to aim at it, we are sworn to strive after it; that man is no

true Christian who sits down lazily and thinks to be saved without striking a blow, who does not wish to be holy as God is holy and perfect as God is perfect. Still, we are confident the dearest children of God do never lay claim to any personal sinlessness and perfection; their hearts' confession is, "Lord, we are exceedingly unprofitable servants, in many things we offend daily," and their hearts' prayer, "Jesus, Master, bear with our sins and pardon our iniquities" (cp. Luke 17:10; James 3:2; Exod. 34:9).

No, beloved, there is nothing unchangeable and the same here below. Kingdoms, churches, human conditions, holy Christians, all are alike in this respect—they are liable to alter, they are never long the same. There is only one account of everything we see around us: it is all fleeting, perishing, passing away. The sun, which has shone on so many births and lighted so many graves, shall one day be darkened; the solid hills, which have looked down on generation after

generation and been trampled on by one short-lived owner after another, shall melt away; the glorious heaven above us shall pass away like a scroll; all speak with one voice—"We shall soon be changed, we shall not always be the same."

And where, beloved, are we to look for comfort and rest in our souls? We want a sure and lasting foundation; we want a hope in which there is no variableness nor shadow of turning: and mark, everyone, this cannot be on earth. They who search for it here will search in vain. A sure hope for the soul is not to be found in the land of the living: "The depth saith, 'It is not in me': and the sea saith, 'It is not with me.' It cannot be gotten for gold, neither shall silver be weighed for the price thereof." But "God understandeth the way thereof, and he knoweth the place" (Job 28:14, 15, 23) where peace may be found, and in the text He sets it openly before our eyes: "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever." Now, of this sameness we desire

to speak fully and freely, and to show you the comfortable matters it contains.

We would remind you, then, that Jesus has always been the same in His office, person, and nature. In these latter days He has graciously made plain to our eyes the way of salvation, by coming upon earth to teach, to suffer, and to die; He has proved Himself the Son of God with power by rising again from the dead. But still we would not have you forget He was always the same—yesterday as well as today.

Before the mountains were brought forth, or the earth and world were formed, from everlasting Jesus Christ was, like the Father, very God. From the beginning He was foreordained to be the Savior of sinners; He was always the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, without whose blood there could be no remission. The same Jesus, to whom alone we may look for salvation, that same Jesus was the only hope of Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and all the

patriarchs; what we are privileged to see distinctly they doubtless saw indistinctly, but the Savior both we and they rest upon is one. It was Christ Jesus who was foretold in all the prophets, and foreshadowed and represented in all the law: the daily sacrifice of the lamb, the cities of refuge, the brazen serpent, all these were so many emblems to Israel of that Redeemer who was yet to come, and without whom no man could be saved. There never was but one road to heaven: Jesus Christ was the way, the truth, and the life, yesterday as well as today.

But we must pass on to another point of even greater interest than this. We remind you that the character of Jesus Christ is always the same—in this too He is unchangeable. What He was in the New Testament days He continues now, and will be even to the end. Consider now, I pray you, what a mine of comfort and consolation lies in that single thought.

He is always the same in love towards

men's souls. It was love towards a fallen world which made Him lay aside for a season His glorious majesty and honor, and take upon Him the form of a servant upon earth; it was love that constrained Him to endure the cross and despise the shame, and lay down His life for us, the ungrateful and the ungodly; it was love that moved Him to shed tears over bloody-minded, unbelieving Jerusalem, because she would not know the things belonging to her peace; and it is just the same love which He feels towards sinners now—He never changes.

Again, Jesus is always the same in His power to save. It was He that cast forth seven devils from Mary Magdalene and raised her up to newness of life. It was He that poured comfort on that weeping penitent sinner in the Pharisee's house, and pronounced those blessed words, "Thy sins are forgiven thee, go in peace" (Luke 7:36-50). It was He that entered the house of Zacchaeus, chief of the publicans, and

declared that salvation was come unto him, and that he was a true son of Abraham. It was He that gave that blessed assurance to the dying thief who prayed to be remembered, "This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). It was He that met the persecuting Saul on his way to Damascus, and cast him down to the ground with all his pride, and put in him a new heart, and sent him forth to preach the faith he had once destroyed. And, O beloved, who need despair? Christ Jesus is still just the same—able to save to the uttermost all those that come to God by Him.

But again, Jesus Christ is always the same in His willingness to receive the penitent. We never read of any who sought Him in sincerity and sought Him in vain, who came poor in spirit and were sent away empty. Oh, no, far otherwise; there is everything to encourage, to invite, to lead us on! Who was it that used those comforting words, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will

give you rest"; "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost"; "Every one who seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life" (Matt. 11:28; John 6:37; Luke 19:10; John 6:40)? Who was it but Jesus Christ—ever the same? He will not go back from one jot or tittle of His words, and what He has spoken He will still make good. "Heaven and earth," He says, "shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33).

Once more: Jesus Christ is always the same in His power to preserve. He will not begin the work of grace and leave it uncompleted; for it is His own word, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life...neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand" (John 10:27, 28). It was He that raised the apostles after they had shamefully forsaken Him and fled; it was He that turned the heart of even Peter back again, though he had denied

Him before His face. And what He did then, beloved, He will do now also, for every believer; it shall never be said that any trusted in Jesus and were confounded, for the Author and Finisher of our faith never changes.

Always the same! It is this which gives such value to the gospels in which our Lord's history is told. We are not reading there the life and sayings of one fickle and changeable like ourselves, but the life and sayings of a Redeemer who is now what He was then. We tell you confidently that all that love and gentleness and compassion and longsuffering and tender-heartedness which you may there see in your Lord and Savior's character are placed before you that you may understand the character of Him from whom alone we receive forgiveness and to whom alone your prayer must be made. We say this because we know He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Always the same! It is this which makes

the gospel so excellent and precious. We do not bid you depend on anything less than the tried cornerstone, the fountain whose water shall never fail, the city of refuge whose walls shall never be broken down, the sure Rock of Ages. Churches may decay and perish; riches may make themselves wings and fly away; but he that builds his happiness on Christ crucified and union with Him by faith, that man is standing on a foundation which shall never be moved, and will know something of true peace.

There are men and women in the world who rest all upon their personal amendment, or upon an unwearied round of services and regular attendance upon holy ordinances; and they fancy their spiritual disease is healed and all is peace. But we believe it is the peace of those who never found out their enemy, the cure of those who have never really felt their hearts' ailments.

Oh no! We believe when a man is once

aroused to see the extent of his soul's danger, when he has felt the burden of his sins indeed grievous and intolerable, when he has found out his debt and his own inability to pay—we are confident that man will never get peace till he has sought the Lord Jesus Christ, till he has taken for a friend and advocate Him that is the same yesterday, and today, and forever. That man will not be put off with the ornaments and trappings of the church which is the bride; he will never rest content till he has laid hold of the Lord Jesus, the Bridegroom, and has become one with Christ and Christ with him.

One word in conclusion. Are there not some among you who in one sense have always been the same—thoughtless, careless about your eternal interests, always lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God, always more anxious about the life that now is than the life which is to come, always disposed to give your best things to the world and the leavings of your time and talent to God?

We warn you plainly there must be a change, a deep foundation-searching change, a change of heart. We call on you to remember the words of Him who never goes back from what He says, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Luke 13:3, 5; Matt. 18:3).

We do not need a prophet's eye to see changes and trials before you all! The breaking up of family circles, the separation from those you love best, the loss of health, friends, earthly possessions: who knows but that they may be very near? Alas for those among you who have no sure resting-place for your weary souls, who are building your happiness on the frail and perishable things of earth, for when you look for solid consolations you shall find none! O friend, the time is flying, death and judgment are at hand; and what will you do if you have to seek your spiritual comforts at the eleventh hour?

Of all your riches you can carry nothing away: naked you came into the world, and naked you must return; of all your dear friends, who now weep when you weep and rejoice when you rejoice, not one can go with you beyond the tomb; they may sit beside you in your last hours, they may watch your spirit's flight, they may follow your body to its long home with measured pace and slow, but there earthly friendship must stop. It can go no farther than the brink of your narrow bed; they will turn away each to his own duties, and you shall be left alone.

O man, be wise in time; learn to lay up treasures in heaven. Think first of a house not made with hands, look to that precious Friend who never fails. Away with your cold and sleeping shadow of religion; cease to be a Christian in name and form only, and become a man of God in deed and in truth. Come to your eternal Father as a little child, with confession and prayer; take all your sins to the Savior who

died upon the cross; let nothing satisfy you till you are a living member of Jesus Christ, one with Christ and Christ with you. In Him, I can assure you, there is hope that never changes, a title to happiness that shall never be overthrown.

But are there any among you who have tasted of this blessed change—who have put off the old man which is corrupt, and put on the new man which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness—who mourn over your own daily shortcomings, and sigh after more holiness, more self-denial, more mortification of the flesh with all its lusts? We bid you take comfort, and remember that Christ is still the same: He called you and gave you the witness of the Spirit, and He will not forsake you. You may waver and tremble: go forward in faith, and He will still support you. There is but one more change before you: the changing of the vile body¹ that it may be made a spiritual body, the putting off the corruptible to put on the

incorruptible, the giving up what is mortal to receive what is immortal, the laying aside the earthly tabernacle, the entering on a heavenly one. Watch, then, and pray, and He that gave you the first change shall give you the second also; and then ye shall go no more out: no more weariness, no more weakness, no more fainting; you shall see your Savior as He is and love Him as you ought, and like Him at last be unchanged and the same forevermore.

¹The phrase “vile body,” meaning “body of humiliation,” as opposed to the glorified body of 1 Corinthians 15, is from “The Order for the Burial of the Dead” in the Book of Common Prayer: “Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy to take unto Himself the soul of our dear brother here departed: we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our *vile body*, that it may be like unto His glorious body, according to the mighty working, whereby He is able to subdue all things to Himself.” (Italics added.)

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