

## BECOMING A ONCE BUT NOW PEOPLE

Once upon a time...there were three bears.

Once upon a time...there was a lovely princess.

Once upon a time...there lived a nasty old witch.

Don't your ears stand up every time a story begins with "once upon a time"...or some version of that?

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...

The word "once" is an amazing word. Every time you hear it at the start of a story, you know something has happened. How things were, are no longer the case. By the end of the story, things have changed. The three bears went on to find a bed that was juuuust...right. The lovely princess fell in love. The nasty old witch became a politician.

It's a case of "Once,...but now".

All good stories have those same two elements. A "once", and a "but now". How things once were, and how things are different now, usually for the better. (Unless you're watching a Darren Aronofsky film). And in every single case something happens in the middle to make the change. Otherwise there is no story. In Star Wars, Luke gets pulled into the struggle against the Empire. In Goldilocks, she happens across 3 bears breaking and entering her house.

And if we had any of the guys who wrote the bible here with us tonight, they'd tell you that the same goes with the life of a Christian. Once, you were one way, but now you are different, and the thing that made things different is that you started to follow Jesus. The bible, as I am about to show you, is full of that message. And it's my belief that God is calling us to live "once but now" lives. If that doesn't make sense yet, I hope it will in about 20 minutes' time. (You'll say ...once, I was confused, but now, I'm not.)

I will tell you that I stumbled on this when I was preparing an entirely different message. But as I was studying, God stopped me with a passage, and I couldn't get past it. I call those speed-bump passages. Passages God throws down in front of me to slow me down. The passage felt lyrical and poetic and deeply life changing. Here it is...

### **1 Peter 2:9-11 (NIV)**

*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Don't you love that?

What God is saying is that there was a time when I, these folks being baptized, all of you who claim to follow Christ, were just individuals, separate from God. We had no spiritual identity. But NOW, we are, together, the people of GOD. We are His chosen people.

And once, like all of you, there was a time that I was outside of God's mercy. Looking at me back then you would have said I was a pretty good kid. (Not now. All illusions have been lost.) But like every single one of us, I was living in a way that was against God's ways, just by nature of being human. The bible calls it sin. And because I had not acknowledged Jesus' love and forgiveness for the way I was running my life, I was without his mercy.

But then, when I was just a little older than these guys getting baptized tonight, Jesus stepped in and said "*David, enough already. I created you. I love you. I died for you. I forgive you.*" Once, I was without mercy, but now, suddenly I knew mercy.

ONCE....BUT NOW.

Importantly, it's not that I suddenly became a perfect person living a perfect life, and that made Jesus say "*Wow! That David rocks! He's perfect! I've got to forgive that dude.*" If that was the case, mercy would be the wrong word. I would have just got what I deserved. No, mercy means, as Romans says elsewhere, that while I was still a sinner, Christ died for me. My *behavior* didn't change to earn that mercy. My *behavior* didn't change in order for me to become a part of His family. I just accepted His offer of forgiveness and what changed was my POSITION in His eyes.

Once I was an individual, outside of God's mercy. BUT NOW, I am a part of HIS people.

Anyway, I am reading this passage and suddenly I couldn't shake this idea of "once-but now".

So I did a bit of a bible hunt. I typed in the words "once....but now" into a concordance. That's like Google for the bible, and this concept of "once..but now" came up time and time again. Often those words were used specifically, and in other cases I followed rabbit holes and found the same concept. And I want to share some of those with you. Why? Because I want all of us to live as "Once but Now" Christians.

A "once but now" Christian isn't some new type of Christian. It's not some weird cult thing. If you are a Christ follower, you are a "once but now" Christian. But not all of us are living that way. Not all of us are living as people who are aware that their position in God's eyes has changed because of what Jesus has done on the cross, and are living differently because of that. Sometimes we look no different to how we once were!

Once we had no spiritual identity, but now we are the people of God.

Once each of you was without mercy, but now you have received mercy.

And now consider this one...

***Ephesians 5:8-9 (NIV)***

*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light. (for the fruit of light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)*

Darkness in the bible is usually a picture of sin and evil and working against the ways of God. So notice it doesn't say "we walked in the darkness". It says once, we WERE darkness. We were sin. We were evil. We were against the ways of God. BUT NOW, we are light. In God's eyes, we're now what happens when a light is switched on in a dark room.

And with this new position comes an implication to how we live...we LIVE AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT. Because of our "but now" relationship with God, we are to live for the things that please God.

And this is something you are about to see a lot tonight. Living well doesn't save us, but because how we once were has changed, God invites us to live in a way that reflects that.

Once you were darkness, now you are light.

Once you were without mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Once you had no spiritual identity, but now you are the people of God.

Once...but now.

**Here's another one for you...**

**Galatians 4:8-9** (NIRV)

*At one time you didn't know God. You were slaves to gods that are really not gods at all. But now you know God. Even better, God knows you. So why are you turning back to those weak and worthless beliefs? Do you want to be slaves to them all over again?*

"Knows" in the bible is a picture of deep friendship and intimacy, and Paul is reminding us that there was a time for all of us when we were not in that type of relationship with God. And I love how Paul corrects himself as he reminds us of how things have changed. "But now you know God. No...wait! It's even better...God knows *you*."

Once you didn't know God, but now you are known by God.

What an amazing thought. If anyone here stood up and said they were close friends of Kate Middleton or Lady Gaga or (insert random celebrity), everyone would go "WOW. *That's so cool.*" They'd want to talk to you, as if by doing so they could touch royalty.

Guys, big deal! I stand before you KNOWN BY GOD. Many of you who sit before me are KNOWN BY GOD. Your position has changed. You went from a position of distance with God to one of intimacy.

But again, notice this comes with an implication to how we live. Paul is saying "*you're known by God and yet you're going back to worthless beliefs? Are you nuts?*" He'd say to us "*Why do you think becoming famous or wealthy or married or financially secure or promoted or even seen as the perfect parent or as the boyfriend of that hot guy will suddenly make your life perfect? Why are you being slaves to those desires again?! You're **known by God** and you are turning your back on Him and trusting in that stuff again? Come on people! Yo're ONCE, BUT NOW Christians!*"

OK, Paul might not say that last bit, but he'd certainly agree with it.

Once you didn't know God, but now you are known by Him.

Once you were darkness, but now you are light.

Once you were without mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Once you had no spiritual identity, but now you are the people of God.

Once, but now.

Then Paul might turn over to Romans, which he'd find very quickly because he wrote it and he'd remind us that...

**Romans 5:10-11 (NIRV)**

*Once we were God's enemies. But we have been brought back to him because his Son has died for us. Now that God has brought us back, we are even more secure. We know that we will be saved because Christ lives.*

Once we were enemies of God.

I find that first bit a terrifying statement.

Sometimes people who think God may exist but don't choose to follow Him think it's just a simple case of God minding His own business, while they mind theirs. But Paul is making it clear that when we are outside of a relationship with God, we are objects of His anger. We are His enemies. Now I don't know about you, but if I am going to pick my enemies, God is not first on my list. I'm picking Mother Teresa or the small kid down the street who I can beat in a scuffle. But God?! No way.

Now this concept of being an enemy of God and objects of His anger is a really politically incorrect thing to talk about. We want to picture God as this gentle fluffy grandfather who, like that little boy down the street, wouldn't hurt a fly... We even picture him up there stroking those flies, and just being really "nice".

But the truth is that God is a HOLY God. He is a PERFECTLY HOLY God and because of that He cannot stand sin.

*(OBJECT LESSON: Bring someone up with a white shirt...bring out BBQ sauce...I know a thing or two about tough stains...working on laundry products at P&G. Will you let me throw this on you? NO - that's a picture of sin in God's eyes.)*

We were once like that stain I wanted to make. Totally at odds with the perfect purity of God. This made us enemies of God. But now, that's not our position. Now, because of Christ, we have been brought back. Now we are secure in Him. Now, we know we will be saved because Christ lives.

Once, you were an enemy of God, but now you have security in Him.

Once you didn't know God, but now you are known by Him.

Once you were darkness, but now you are light.

Once you were without mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Once you had no spiritual identity, but now you are the people of God.

Once, but now.

Now consider this breathtaking one...

***Ephesians 2:12-13 (NIV)***

*Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

Once, we were without hope, and without God in the world. Now we have been brought near.

The world is a mess. I cannot remember a time in my life where there has been more tragedy and evil and greed, or more brutal natural disasters or more loneliness and discontent. One of the things that Cathy and I often say to each other is that we cannot imagine how people can stay optimistic in the world as it is today without God, and I think this passage talks to that. You see, when we are without God, we are without hope.

Nearly 3 years ago Barack Obama got elected. Now, this is NOT a political statement either way, but I think one of the big reasons he got elected was that I think his rhetoric of HOPE struck a deep chord with people. People are desperate for hope. But hope is only as good as the reality of the thing you put your hope in.

Whether we felt it or not, there was a stage where each one of us was without hope. But now...you who were once without hope and far away from God have been brought near by Jesus' death on the cross. And because of Jesus we are offered hope. Genuine hope. Reliable hope. Hope that life will one day kick the butt of death. Hope that one day, in heaven, there will be no sickness, or death, or heartache, only joy and feasting and life. Hope that what we see going on now in the world is not the final story. Hope that we are forgiven.

Once we were without hope, but now we have hope in Him.

Once, you were an enemy of God, but now you have security in Him.

Once you didn't know God, but now you are known by Him.

Once you were darkness, but now you are light.

Once you were without mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Once you had no spiritual identity, but now you are the people of God.

Once, but now.

I could keep going on...but my message is this...We need to live as "once, but now" people.

Sometimes as Christians we forget how we once were. But we need to remind ourselves of where we once stood, because that's the only way we can look at what we now have and understand the amazing grace that He has shown us. I think it's important that every one of us as Christ followers keep both our "Once" and our "But now" stories in mind. Of course, if we only dwell on how we once were, or keep living there, we have no story to tell. But if we only focus on the "but now", and forget how we once were before God, we risk becoming proud of how we behave. And God really has no time for pride.

Now as we think about how we once were before we became a Christian, this doesn't mean we have to just think about how we once *behaved*. The truth is, some of you even get embarrassed because you don't have some dramatic Christian transformation story. You've been a Christian for as long as you can remember. Just like your parents were. But secretly, you wish you could claim some really evil background, just to make your testimony rock: *"Oh yes, I was a con-man, swindler, drunkard, 6 pill a day drug taker before I met the Lord at the age of 5"*.

It's really a weird Christian version of pride that makes us think that's necessary.

Remember, what's most important is what our *position* was with God, not what our *behavior* was. The fact is that outside of Christ, we were ALL once in a pickle, regardless of the age we started to follow Him and regardless of the circumstances of our conversion. Those of you who came to Christ early in your life were no different in God's eyes to the pill-popping, shotgun-toting mass murderer you saw on the TV last night. That's because in light of God's holiness, all our sin is the same.

Therefore, we were all... once without hope, and an enemy of God.

There was once a time we all didn't know God, ...and were darkness, and had not received mercy, and were not a people of God.

But not any more.

The moment you surrendered your life to Jesus and started to follow Him, a new story unfolded.

Now, you have hope in Him.

Now you have security in Him.

Now you are known by Him.

Now you are light.

Now you know mercy.

Now you are the people of God!

Once...but now.

Do you get that?

When we remember we are "once, but now" people, we really grasp what it means to be a Christian. We see our spiritual lives as important so we nurture them. We realize that the choices we make with our life matter, because they reflect the reality of a relationship with Christ. We realize that the people we go to church with are a part of God's people, so we serve them and forgive them when they get painful. And they WILL get painful.

Simply put, "once but now Christians" live as "once but now Christians".

Tonight we watched four young people get baptized. They stood before you and got soaked saying I am a once but now person. Baptism is an amazing picture of a once, but now life. It's a declaration that we want to follow Jesus completely. And as they went into the water, they were saying that that they understood what they once were, but are now. How God once saw them is not how He sees them now. It's an unbelievably amazing statement of faith.

People...Jesus changes lives.

Let me close with this: The reason I think the apostle Paul is one of the bible writers who talks about "once but now" so much is that he realized he too was a "once but now" Christian. Before he met Christ, he was a scumbag. Sorry if that offends you, but that's what he was. He'd tell you himself. He said he was the worst of sinners. He said he was a filthy rag. He used to be the guy who stood around as these "Christians" were whipped or stoned or beaten to death. He was the guy whose life ambition was to rub out this then new religion. And then Jesus said, uh-uh Paul. I love you. You work for me now.

So consider his testimony:

***Galatians 1:21-25 (ESV)***

*Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.*

That's the story of Paul's life there... "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." That's what Jesus does to people.

And what happens when we live as "Once but now" people? Paul's story shows us..." And (people) glorified God because of me."

That's what I want my life to be about. That's what I want the lives of these girl's to be about. That people would glorify God because of us.

If you are a Christian, that's what God is asking of you as well. That your life would glorify Him. That it would point to Him.

If you are not a follower of Jesus, I want you to take seriously where you stand with God tonight. You are an enemy of God. You are without hope. You are darkness. You are out of relationship with the One who made you.

Now realise where you *could* stand. You could make your past the "once upon a time" it deserves to be. From tonight. The story of your life can change. From tonight. He died for you, and He is there saying, "*But now, things can be different.*"

Let me be really practical here...as you watch the girls be baptized, ask God...is this what you want from me? If you sense He is saying yes, come up to the front during the next song and we'll talk to you. No one will think you are a fool. (In fact, they might think you're a fool if you don't!)

And like a guy called John Newton, you'll now what it means to sing "*I once was lost, but now I'm found. Was blind, but now I see.*"

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