The Great Exchange

This book is called *Trading Places*, and it’s all about making a change that will last.

It also sounds strikingly similar to one very hot cable television show.

Now since it’s just you and me huddled under your favorite reading light, are you willing to admit that you’ve watched at least one episode of that cult-phenom, *Trading Spaces*? If so, you probably think *Trading Places* is a takeoff—maybe even a rip-off—of that show.

If you’ve never seen *Trading Spaces*, the premise is simple: neighbors get a once-in-a-lifetime chance to do a massive make-over in one room of each other’s home. They get two days and a thousand bucks, along with the services of a self-proclaimed decorator and a self-admiring carpenter.

Each hour-long episode follows the progress of these homegrown do-overs, culminating in “the reveal,” that magical moment when the neighbors, eyes securely covered, are led into their respective homes by that way-too-perky Paige Davis, and they’re allowed—ta-da!—to see . . . how do I put this? . . . the interesting results.
To me, the show’s best moment is when the camera moves in for a close-up and the homeowners uncover their eyes and start shouting, “Ohmygod! Ohmygod! Ohmygod!” And we get to decipher whether that “Ohmygod!” means they’re delighted or ticked, thrilled beyond words or suffering an aneurysm. My guess is, more often than not, they’re just trying not to throw up!

I suppose it’s possible to pick up some helpful, cheap decorating tips from *Trading Spaces*, but people don’t watch the show to get ideas; they watch hoping this week’s project will completely unravel—that the designer will totally weird out and slap lime green paint on the walls, wallpaper the living room with hay, and dress up the fireplace with dancing pink flamingos! Because once the hay starts flying? Veteran *Trading Spaces* fans all know there’s going to be blood at the reveal.

Which is why all participants are told beforehand there’s a real good chance they won’t like the final product. In fact, all applicants for the show are required to sign a release acknowledging that *Trading Spaces* is not responsible, in any way, for redoing their room gone bad.

**CHANGE IS RISKY**

Which brings us to the topic of change. When you’ve decided that you want or even need to make a change in your life, doing it the *Trading Spaces* way is risky business. Really risky. Because invariably, to make the change, you have to release something—just like the show’s participants release a room in their homes. But you release it, believing the trade will be worth it.

Now it wouldn’t be risky if you were guaranteed that everything you release is going be replaced by something even better. But that’s not *Trading Spaces*—and that’s not real life, either.
In the show, each participant gets to cull his or her room for family artifacts and irreplaceable keepsakes to protect them from the make-over. They even get the chance to replace the actual room’s furniture with some of the rattiest stuff they own, and they can coach their counterparts about color schemes that would be entirely unacceptable. In other words, they still have a degree of ownership in the change.

What we’ll discover as we move through this book, however, is that when you decide to make a change in your life, you have to remove yourself entirely from the driver’s seat—you have to relinquish your death grip on whatever it is you deeply care about and then leave the final results entirely in the hands of another . . . in the hands of God.

Please understand: trying to make a lasting renovation in your life by Trading Spaces (you let go, but only after some carefully negotiated limitations and selfishly driven directives) is a bad trade . . . a really bad trade. Primarily because the Trading Spaces way still allows you to make changes according to your rules.

But who’s to say that you know what trade is actually in your best interest?

Consider Michael Phelps, the golden boy of the 2004 Summer Olympic Games. Phelps took home a record eight medals. He became an overnight hero and enjoyed a personal marketability worth millions. But now, according to his manager, his image has been “shattered.” You see, Phelps was arrested just four months later for driving under the influence. As one radio announcer put it, “It seems that the great Olympian Michael Phelps can not only swim like a fish, he evidently drinks like one, too.”

Bad trade, Michael. Trading your impeccable and extremely marketable image for one lousy buzz? That’s Trading Spaces—making a change, but with my hand still on the wheel. Which is why Michael’s manager is openly wondering if Michael’s image can be salvaged.¹
Scott Peterson wanted to make a change, too. He wanted freedom, so he traded his pregnant wife and unborn son for a death sentence.

Bad trade, Scottie.

The Boston Red Sox wanted to change their post-season fortunes, so they traded Babe Ruth to the Yankees and received in exchange a curse that lasted almost a century.

In 1626, Indians traded the island of Manhattan for $24 worth of beads and trinkets. Richard Nixon, seeking reelection, traded secrecy for disgrace and a presidential resignation.

Martha Stewart, wanting to make a fast buck, traded insider information for a five-month stay in prison.

Bill Clinton traded momentary pleasure for impeachment.

It’s true: making a change is risky business. Especially when you make the change and insist on doing so by your rules. When change is made that way? The change doesn’t work out so well.

Is Trading Places Realistic?

Now I know you realize that this book is not about a redecorating show. It’s not a takeoff, either. It’s actually a throwback. All the way back to 1983 and a movie called—are you with me?—Trading Places.

The movie stars Eddie Murphy as Billy Ray Valentine, a down-on-his-luck street hustler, and Dan Aykroyd as Louis Winthorpe III, a successful New York commodities broker.

Now socialists have debated for years the impact of environment versus genetics. Is it nature that determines the kind of person we will be, or is it nurture? Well, in the movie two elderly millionaires make a wager on that very point. Randolph Duke believes he can take a common criminal and make him a successful businessman—and that he can remove Louis from his riches and he’ll become a criminal.
The Great Exchange

Mortimer Duke disagrees, so for their usual one-dollar bet, the whole plan for change is set in motion.

By the way, you may recognize this plot. It’s essentially the same conversation that took place between Satan and the Lord regarding Job. Satan believed that Job was good only because his environment was good. Take away all that good stuff, Satan claimed, and Job would become just as vile as the rest of his fellow men.

So that’s the bet.

At first glance, the movie seems to suggest that Randolph was right. Billy really takes to the business (not to mention all those new toys), and Louis nearly commits a heinous crime before they both realize they’ve been duped. That’s when both young men join forces to teach the Duke brothers a lesson.

By movie’s end, the theory has been disproved, as the movie’s most blessed duo, those conniving Duke brothers, turns out to be the most depraved—living in the lap of luxury yet betting on two men’s misfortunes for nothing more than one lousy dollar and the satisfaction of being right.

Then again, Billy and Louis also mess up. They aren’t content just to settle the score—they want to destroy those Dukes. And in the final scene, with a series of trading maneuvers that economists still puzzle over today, *Billy Ray and Louis actually pull it off!*

Now what Billy Ray and Louis do in the last scene of the movie isn’t even possible in real life—only in the make-believe world of Hollyweird. But in attempting to pull it off, they do exactly what our friends on the *Trading Spaces* show do. They try to make a change—but by their rules.

So the bottom line: even though the movie is called *Trading Places*—nobody really does. Billy is still a hustler, Louis is still trapped by his greed, and the Duke boys are still playing games. Each wanted to make a change—but they wanted to do it their way.
CHANGE IS HARD

Which brings me to a second lesson about making a change. *Change is hard.* And true, lasting change? Seldom works the way you’d think it would.

Consider the apostle Paul. Talk about needing to make a change. Paul had “a thorn in [his] flesh” and living with that thorn, in his own words, was “torment” (2 Corinthians 12:7). Some say the “thorn” was epilepsy, or malaria, or maybe migraine headaches. Others claim it was an estranged wife or a chronic eye disease. Whatever it was, Paul wanted it gone! He said, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away” (v. 8).

But look at how God answered those pleas. He said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (v. 9).

In other words, God said no.

“Paul, I’ll take care of your thorn. Just know, the great need for change you face is not thorn removal, it’s how you decide to respond to that thorn. So I’m not taking it away, nor am I suggesting that you can take this weakness and turn it into a strength. What I want you to discover is this: my power is made perfect in your weakness. When you’re at your weakest moment, that’s when I am strong. So instead of taking the thorn away, I’m going to give you the grace to endure it. As you tap into my grace, you’ll watch my strength trade places with your thorn.”

And that’s exactly what happened. Paul wrote, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me” (v. 9).

Now that’s quite a change. Not exactly the change Paul was looking for, but still a change. Rather than continuing to beg God to remove the thorn, Paul received God’s grace in order to embrace
his thorn. And he learned how, in doing that, God’s strength can trade places with our weakness.

That’s what I call the Great Exchange.

**THE GREAT EXCHANGE**

Do you realize what Paul discovered in that encounter? He learned that problems cannot be solved at the same level they’re created. Which means Trading Spaces doesn’t work. I mean, release is an important part of the deal. But you can’t just hand over your heartache to someone who also deals with heartache. That’s no way to make lasting change.

And Paul also learned that true life change isn’t sourced in nature or nurture, either. I mean, if making a change is only about you and the strength you alone can bring to that moment—trust me, when life gets tough, you’ll fold faster than Louis Winthorpe III.

Because true change—change that lasts—is not about you! It’s really not!

It’s all about where. Where does your strength come from?

If lasting change is really all about making the Great Exchange—if it’s all about finding Christ’s power right in the vortex of my own weakness—the big question is this:

Exactly how do I do that?

**Thorny Theology**

Let’s travel back to the ancient book of Isaiah. In chapter 40, the prophet mentions two reactions that are common to everyone in need of change. Maybe they’re in torment, like Paul. Maybe it’s a physical malady or a relationship disaster or a financial conundrum. But whatever it is, there is no discernible solution.
How do people typically react when faced with a thorny problem? Look at Isaiah 40:27: “My way is hidden from the LORD.” That’s the first thing we think: God has flown the coop. And that’s why Trading Spaces is such an attractive option. I mean, if God is missing, then I need to figure this out myself! If I can’t see Him or feel Him or don’t hear from Him—He must not be around. “My way is hidden!”

What’s the second thing we think when surrounded by thorns? “My cause is disregarded” (v. 27). In other words, “God isn’t interested in what I need. And since He obviously doesn’t care about getting my life turned around? I’m going have to do it myself!”

But hold on. How does God respond to our typical reactions? “Do you not know? Have you not heard?” (v. 28).

Gee, that helps!

Have you ever been upset or impatient or just plain worn-out from the struggle, only to have someone say, “Don’t you know?” or “Haven’t you heard?” Why, that’s the most comfortless counsel you can imagine. Unless it’s true.

What Is God Like?

Isaiah 40 is a wonderful short course in the nature and awesome power of God, as the prophet reveals truths about God in rapid-fire delivery.

God is in control. God “has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand” and “with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens” (v. 12). He has also “held the dust of the earth in a basket” and “weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance.”

No mere man has ever done such things—only God.
In verse 13, the Lord asks, “Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed him as his counselor?”

*His intellect and wisdom are far beyond that of mortals.*

“To whom, then, will you compare God?” (v. 18).

*The answer is, no one.*

Isaiah draws the only conclusion that can be drawn: “Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth” (vv. 21, 22).

Our God resides far above human conflict. He cares for us and sympathizes with us in our pain, but He’s not shocked by the course of human events. He isn’t getting an ulcer because of Iraq. He’s not panicking because of the tsunami or Hurricane Katrina. He’s not fretting about the moral decline of our culture.

He cares . . . but He is also in control.

God himself asks, “‘To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?’ . . . Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of His great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing” (vv. 25, 26).

That’s the theme of verse 28: Don’t you know? Haven’t you heard? Lift up your eyes! “The Lord is the everlasting God.”

And because He is, this thing you think you need to change is well within the scope of His knowledge. He’s the Lord, after all! And as Lord, He is over all and above all and in all. He is totally aware and absolutely in sync with whatever it is you’re going through.

And since He reigns on high, He has the full panoramic view of your life—including all things past, present, and future! All you can see is your past and right now! And “right now” is thorny. It’s a torment! You can’t possibly imagine how God could use that thorn for good.
But from His perspective, God sees the whole spectrum of your life. And He says, “I know what I’m doing. I see what you’re going through, and I can handle it. I’m not tired. I’m not freaked out. I’m not wondering, What in the world am I going to do about that? I’m not chewing Tums or taking Zoloft. I know in complete fullness the whole story of your life. And I know how it’s going to turn out, because I’m in charge, remember?”

God is powerful and strong. Not only is God in control, He is also “the Creator of the ends of the earth” (v. 28). Which means He has power to handle whatever comes down your pike. And in case you’re wondering about His energy level, “He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom” (v. 28).

He’s the creator of all things who understands absolutely everything. He is full of compassion and goodness. He will never do you wrong. He will never leave you in the lurch. He’ll never turn His back on you when you need Him.

Now He may not move according your timetable, and He may, as with Paul, decide that it’s better for to you live with your weakness in His strength than for Him to take that weakness away—but that’s His call. Because He is, after all, everlasting!

And all that strength of His? “He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak” (v. 29). Is that cool or what? God takes His enormous strength and He just gives it away—to “the weary.” To the very people who thought they had enough strength, so they relied on that strength, but then ran out of gas. Who thought they could find their own way, but couldn’t see so clearly after all and landed in even deeper weeds than where they started. To these poor, weary souls—you know, you and me—God gives strength.

And it’s not just “If only I were a little younger!” Nah. “Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall”
(v. 30). I mean, like it or not, “stumble” is what we do, young or old!

So what do you do when “stumble” happens? When you’ve been grounded, and you’re not sure where to turn—and not sure you’ve got the strength to go there even if you did know.

Do you hike down every possible rabbit trail? Race down each dead end, butting up against every obstacle, only to wind up bloody and tired and angry and frustrated? Is that what you do?

That’s what we do. Just like an episode of Trading Spaces. Gotta get the project done. Make the final touches. Get the room together. Hurry, hurry, hurry!

“Yet those who wait for the L ORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary” (v. 31, NASB). That’s the Great Exchange: my weakness for God’s strength. Trading Places.

And the key to completing this transaction? Don’t charge ahead and do it yourself! Don’t think that a thousand bucks and two days are going to help. Don’t think that somehow you’re going to pull this off in your own strength. Because that kind of change will never last. To find true, lasting change you’ve got to make God’s Great Exchange.

And His promise of unbridled, undiminished, unequaled strength is freely reserved . . . for those who “wait.”

FOR THOSE WHO WAIT

Not those who rush ahead, or finagle their way through, or scramble and scratch till they’ve got an ulcer, a migraine, high blood pressure, and two strokes. Those who wait.

The Hebrew word translated wait means to twist or stretch in order to make something strong. As a noun, it means “rope,” and it carries the idea of stretching or twisting a little strand of hair
around other little strands of hair, and then that group of strands is wrapped around another group of strands, until finally a massive rope is formed. So that the original strand—now wrapped within the interior of what is now a thick rope—becomes as strong as the rope itself.

Those who wait for the Lord, Isaiah 40:31 is saying—those who are willing to Trade Places and by faith allow God to wrap His power around their measly little strand of weakness—those who wait will receive in exchange four amazing benefits.  

New Strength

The first benefit that you receive in exchange for your weakness is *new strength.*

When you decide to trust God enough that you put your hope in His strength and not yours—when you decide to hit the brakes, stick it in neutral, and place your ultimate confidence in Him—when you decide that your need isn’t going to be resolved by pasting pink flamingos on fireplaces—He’s going to reward that faith by infusing your life with new strength.

No longer will you come to the end of the day exhausted. No longer will you fall into bed dog-tired because you’ve spent all your energy trying to work yourself out of a jam—trying to make a trade, plug the holes, get it right.

And though people all around you may be collapsing from exhaustion, God will bring to you who wait for Him a strength you could never know apart from Him. That’s the Great Exchange.

Did you know that when a storm approaches, an eagle doesn’t fly away from that storm? He actually flies *into* the storm. Because the eagle knows that if he sets his wings to the wind, with hardly any effort at all he can catch those powerful updrafts and fly higher and faster and stronger *because of the storm* than he could ever fly on his own.
And so can you. That’s why God seldom just takes away weakness. He knows that with His strength wrapped around your weakness, your weakness will cause you to fly higher and longer and stronger than you could ever fly without it.

So set your face to the wind. Put your trust in God—and “wait.” He will give you new strength.

A Better Perspective
The second benefit of Trading Places is that you gain a better perspective.

Isaiah says, “They will soar on wings like eagles.” The beauty of soaring is not just the freedom you feel. No, when you’re as high as an eagle can fly, you can see a lot farther ahead.

I’m told that on a clear day an eagle can spot a fish in a lake several miles away. And you will see with unusual clarity, too, when you learn to wait. Not only do you gain new strength, you mount up with wings and you soar! And as you soar, you develop the ability to see life differently than when you were just walking.

Now you can see out into the future, you can see through painful circumstances, you can see the path that God is laying out before you. You can see His perfect plan unfolding right before your eyes.

Increased Stamina
The third benefit of Trading Places is increased stamina. You “will run and not grow weary.”

You’re not getting weary because you aren’t pressing anymore. No longer are you frantically devising exit strategies and wringing your hands in fear and wracking your brain for an answer and pacing the floor in panic. Instead, you just let God wrap His enormous power around your measly little strand of rope—and you wait.
You don’t work late into the night; you rest! I don’t mean you do nothing. It’s just that what you do brings results, and results keep your heart from growing weary.

Bob Ringewold was driving when—BOOM!—he looked up and saw the caved-in roof of his car. He stopped and got out to find that an eight-pound sucker fish had just fallen from the sky and smashed his car! Evidently the fish had fallen from the talons of an eagle that couldn’t hold on anymore.

You know what Ringewold did? This is so cool. He took the fish home and fried it up for dinner.

Now I don’t know Ringewold from a ringworm—but I know this: Ringewold’s been through some stuff. And I know that because he took a hit, but he kept moving anyway. I mean, the dude hardly missed a beat!

That’s what happens when you learn to wait. You become so strong in Him that setbacks no longer hold you back! Instead, whenever life drops a salmon on you? You make salmon-ade! (Sorry.)

So if your home is filled with prickly, gnarly thorns right now, don’t just Trade Spaces and frantically try, in your own power, to redecorate your life! Instead, Trade Places and let God redo your life in a wonderfully creative and absolutely stunning thorn theme that, in time, will absolutely transform you!

Because that’s what the Great Exchange is all about.

A Stronger Resistance

There’s a fourth benefit to Trading Places. You strengthen your resistance to future obstacles. You find that you can “walk [and walk and walk] and not become weary.”

You don’t “become weary” because throughout this whole ordeal you’ve been letting God wrap His big rope around your little strand. You’ve been feeding on His strength and seeing things from His perspective and storing up all kinds of extra resolve.
And He’s been putting steel in your frame and speaking encouragement to your heart.

Part of our problem is we think that waiting means nothing is happening. But don’t you believe it.

Because the truth is, God is at work in those unseen corridors of your life, and He’s building within you a strength that will not be denied. That’s why I’m telling you: whatever doesn’t beat you down will build you up! And make you stronger for the next time a fish lands on your car.

It Didn’t Come to Stay . . .

A friend wrote me a note sometime ago. And talk about going through stuff? This woman has a lifetime supply of salmon-ade! In her note to me, she said that one of her favorite phrases in the Bible is “And it came to pass.”

It didn’t come to stay . . . it came to pass.

Whatever is in your life right now? It hasn’t come to stay. It came to pass.

This thorn you’re dealing with won’t be with you forever. It didn’t come to stay. It came to pass. It did!


Isaiah 40:31 speaks to three inescapable stages of life. There are times when life is like an eagle’s. You just set your wings to the wind and you fly! Life is good and God is great.

But there are other times when life isn’t so exciting. Oh, you’re making it. You’re running, but you’re certainly not tip-toeing through tulips. At best, you’re just getting by.

There are still other times when all you can do is remind yourself to breathe. You’re just trying to hold on.

Isaiah tells us that even then, we’ve got to wait. Because our God does His best work in dark times. He’s not going to leave
you in the lurch. He’s not going to walk away. No, He’ll make the very trade you need. When the time is right, He’ll carry you on His wings to some new, high place—and you will be forever and eternally changed.

See, Trading Places, unlike Trading Spaces, isn’t risky at all. If your trading partner is God, you’re tapping into not only His power but also His character! And remember, our God is not just a mighty God; our God’s word is true!

And that’s vital, because making a change is not about the size of your faith or the level of your effort! It’s in whom you have placed your trust. Place it in yourself—or your neighbor—and you’ll wind up in a room filled with hay and pink flamingos. But place your trust in the Lord and wait for Him to do what He alone can do, and you’ll soar like an eagle.

Stop Working, Start Waiting

My wife and I are spending time with a young woman who is right now in the throes of a Trading Places dilemma. She’s deep in debt and has also become seriously involved with a young man who really cares about her.

The trouble is, the financial deal is eating her alive! She’s trying to manage, but you know how it is—there’s got to be an easier way, right?

So you know what they’ve come up with? “Let’s move in together. That way we can halve our expenses and get out of debt faster. And we can find out if we’re right for each other and whether, in fact, we belong together. This makes perfect sense!”

Truth is, that plan is just Trading Spaces. It’s moving from one location to another, but haulin’ all her stinkin’ garbage right along behind her. It’s a two-day plan that could ruin the rest of her life.
If my young friend goes ahead with this plan, she will live to regret it. Trading Spaces is nothing more than rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic! It doesn’t change a thing, and it keeps you from doing what really could change things!

How much better to just Trade Places. To move off the throne of your life and let God sit there instead. To stop frantically pacing and strategizing and actualizing your latest, greatest escape plan—and instead, just wait on Him.

That’s what my young friend should do. She needs to slow way, way down and spend some time letting God wrap His rope of strength around her little strand. She needs to let God be God, and freely admit that she is not.

And if she’ll do that? God will transform all her weaknesses into enormous strength, and a change will take place in her—a change quite unlike any change she could even begin to imagine, a change for her good. That’s the way it works when you stop Trading Spaces and decide to Trade Places.

Please take a close look at these words. The Bible says, “Since before time began no one has ever imagined, no ear heard, no eye seen, a God like you who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who happily do what is right, who keep a good memory of the way you work” (Isaiah 64:4, 5, THE MESSAGE).

God moves in direct response, He acts on my behalf, He works for my cause—when I do what? When I wait for Him, when I get my weakness wrapped up by His strength, when I put my trust in Him and not in myself or anybody else. God goes to work in the very moment I stop working—when I stop Trading Spaces and finally decide to Trade Places.