



Lake Wales
Church of Christ
463 N. Buck Moore Rd.
Lake Wales, FL 33898
www.lakewalescoc.com
(863) 676-4114

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Tower of Strength

**“The name of the Lord is a strong tower
The righteous runs into it and is safe.”
—Proverbs 18:10**

Manaen and the Butterfly Effect

There is a phenomenon in science called “the butterfly effect.” Actually, the technical term for it is “sensitive dependence on initial conditions in a dynamical system.” I can see why we use the former term more often!

In 1951, a meteorologist named Edward Lorenz was using a computer to run a numerical model of weather predictions. The first time he entered a value of 0.506127 for one of the mathematical variables in the model (the most digits the primitive computer would hold). The next time, Lorenz took a shortcut and only carried out the variable to the thousandths place, 0.506.

We’re talking about a truly tiny change—like having \$1,000 in your pocket and discovering that you’ve lost a single dime. It’s a negligible, meaningless amount, and you wouldn’t give it a moment’s thought. Thus, Lorenz was stunned to discover that when he ran the model the second time, the computer came up with a completely different weather prediction!

Discovering that the miniscule change in just one small variable could have gigantic results in

outcomes, Lorenz published his findings in a paper for the New York Academy of Sciences, and stated, “one flap of a seagull’s wings could change the course of weather forever.” In later papers and speeches, he changed the seagull to a more-poetic butterfly, and a new phrase was coined that has found its way into popular culture.

The “butterfly effect” can be seen in all sorts of situations where two objects that begin very close together end up very far apart. If you’ve ever watched people play the Plinko carnival game with discs bouncing off pegs on the way down to prize cups, you know that you can put two discs in the same starting position, but the second will rarely make it to the bottom in the same place as the first.

When I was a kid playing in a rocky stream near our property in Belfast, NY, I would put two similar sticks right next to each other in the water. Then I would follow the sticks downstream. Within just a few yards, the sticks would respond differently to the currents. One stick would turn ever so slightly and catch the current a little more, and begin to pick up a little more speed. The other might catch the very edge of an eddy and go past a rock just an inch closer than the other stick did, and bump it and ricochet into a calm pool at the edge of the stream where it stalled for a few moments. I could never keep up with them for long, but it was fun to imagine that while those identical sticks started their journey shoulder-to-shoulder, by the time they spilled out of the mouth of the river into the sea, they were separated from one another by miles and days.

In fact, if you’d like to see this effect yourself, exit this church building, cross the road to the open field, and stand at the top of the hill. This happens to be the crest of the Lake Wales ridge, the dividing line between two watersheds. If you spit over your left shoulder, the saliva will roll westward, join the Caloosahatchee, and eventually reach the Gulf of Mexico. If you spit over your right shoulder, the saliva will roll eastward, join the Kissimmee, and eventually reach the Atlantic Ocean. A change in starting position of just a few inches will change the outcome by hundreds of miles.

By now you must be asking, Who's Manaen, and what does he have to do with the butterfly effect?

In Acts 13:1, we are introduced to the teachers and prophets at the church in Syrian Antioch: "Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul." From this point Luke begins to describe the exciting and important missionary work of Paul and Barnabas, and we forget all about once-mentioned Manaen. But this passing description of him is truly fascinating, and it deserves our closer attention.

The Herod to whom Luke refers is Herod Antipas, one of the most corrupt, sinful individuals mentioned in Scripture. His father was Herod the Great, the so-called king of Judea who slaughtered the infants in Bethlehem in an effort to destroy Jesus. Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea until 39AD. He is the Herod who took his brother's wife and beheaded John the Baptist (Mark 6:14–29). He is the Herod who mocked Jesus and sent Him back to Pilate (Luke 23:8–12). His nephew, Herod Agrippa, is the one who killed the Apostle James in Acts 12:1–2. Obviously, the Herods were not nice folks.

While the Greek term *syntrophos* could mean a number of things, including "attendant at court," all the translations except the RSV prefer the most natural meaning, "childhood companion, or foster brother," from the verb *trephô*, "to bring up or raise" (see Luke 4:16) and the prefix *syn*, "with or together." Some scholars believe that the two had been nursed together and raised together by the same woman (McGarvey, *Commentary on Acts*, Vol. 2, p. 2).

Whatever the precise details of their childhood, it seems clear that Herod Antipas and Manaen started out in similar circumstances and in the same wicked household. Their masters taught them the same lessons, gave them the same privileges, and pointed them toward the same goals. They witnessed the same sights and heard the same sounds. They likely ate at the same tables and reclined on the same cushions at the same court functions.

It is therefore utterly amazing that one went on to become, like the rest of his household, a hedonistic pagan and a murderous tyrant, and the other went on to become a follower of Jesus Christ!

This wide divergence points not to random flutterings of wind or a lucky tide, but to the awesome transformative power of the gospel. Herod and his kin ignored the gospel. Manaen felt the pull upon his conscience and responded. And before long, he ended up in a very different position than his peers!

Is it possible for a person steeped in a sinful environment, fed on the philosophies of evolution and materialism, encouraged in the ways of the world, to chart a different course from all his fellows? Yes!

Is it possible for a person to choose an entirely different direction from the culture he was raised in, to defy the expectations of his society and trade it all in for the hope of heaven? Yes!

Is it possible for a person to find God in a prison cell-block, in a platoon of soldiers, in a Hollywood neighborhood? It sure is! All it takes is an encounter with the truth of God's word to push a person onto a very different path.

The Bible says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:1–2). Two men may sit in the same pew—one can strive for eternal life, the other can turn a deaf ear. Two sisters can grow up in the same God-forsaken household—one can put God first, the other reject God entirely. A thousand people can attend the same high school, and a handful can emerge with a love for Jesus Christ. What starts together doesn't have to stay together, thanks to the call of the gospel message. Let's all be serious about our relationship to God, and our responsibility to share it with others!

—*John Guzzetta*

Quote of the Week:

"Some think holding on makes one strong. Sometimes, it's letting go."

—*Herman Hesse*