

PREFACE

The habit of many, on the occasion of a new year, is to forget the past and look forward into the bright promises of the days ahead. But God's word gives us two reasons for, instead, taking the opportunity of a new year to look *backward*, which we will consider in this brief, devotional study. The first reason for looking back is to determine...

WHAT TO THROW OUT

It was time to clean out, rearrange, reallocate and reorganize the library shelves.

World History required more room, and War History needed to be moved. A few Political Biographies had been erroneously shelved in American History, and my immediate Reference books needed to be moved across the room. Meanwhile a large number of books needed to be summarily discarded—a painful but necessary task. These included such noteworthy titles as

Business Executive's Handbook (1939)

California, Oregon & Washington Country Inns, Lodges & Historic Hotels (1988)

Advanced Golf (1908)

Caesar's Gallic War (in Latin)

Social Policies for America in the Seventies: Nine Divergent Views (1968)

Mathematische Strömungslehre (in German, 1928)

With two boxes of dust-laden books removed from the shelves and ready for delivery to the local landfill; with titles reordered and better organized; with shelves freshly vacuumed and polished, and space now allocated for new arrivals—with the chaff removed and the remaining wheat neatly organized, I was ready for a new year.

And then it dawned on me that the same process needed to be applied not just to the library, to the room in which I work, but to my life in general. What in my life is cluttering up the place, and is no longer needed? What is there that has been misplaced, and should be moved? What is there that should be allocated more room? And what is there that should be summarily removed to the county landfill?

In the life of a Christian, this necessary but painful process is far more than a seasonal sprucing up, cleaning up; it is not, ultimately, even for us. It is for the holiness of God's name—as the Lord told Israel through the prophet Ezekiel.

Read Ezekiel 36:22-23.

Just as Israel was the testimony of Yahweh to the world at that time, Christians today are the testimony of Christ to the world in which we live. And God is jealous that His name be represented in purity and holiness.

Read Ezekiel 36:24-28.

While everyone else around this time of year vows to lose weight, go jogging every morning, make more money, finally whip that storage closet into shape, or just be a better person in general, the Christian should be taking stock of his or her spiritual life—which is, in fact, the *entirety* of the believer's life. For followers of Christ, there is no bright line demarcating the spiritual from the temporal. We are now spiritual beings; our relationship with God, through Christ, by means of the Holy Spirit is a 24/7, minute-by-minute thing that does not cease on Sunday morning when the preacher closes with the "Amen."

And, of course, we need not wait for the calendar page to turn from December to January. We need not wait for a new year to take stock of the condition of our part of this relationship. There is never a bad time to winnow the chaff from our life.

There are books on my shelves that were acquired decades ago, for reasons since lost in the fog of time, that now are an ill fit. Perhaps they represent philosophies that were at home in my more rebellious youth. Perhaps they contain thoughts and positions that I rejected, or grew out of, years ago. Old books can be like rediscovered love notes from old girlfriends; once they were precious, but now only embarrassing—and harmful to one's marital well-being.

Just so the thoughts and philosophies that once populated the shelves of our minds. We long ago forgot about them, but on odd occasions they reveal themselves, pushing belligerently to the front of our thoughts. Through disuse we thought we were rid of them, but had never really packaged them up and removed them to the county dump.

Instead of these old—but still harmful—interests, we are to be satisfied with the things of a holy Lord.

Read Psalms 65:2-4.

These obsolete philosophies now have no place in a life containing Jesus. They are more than a distraction: they carry the seed of cancer, the germ of corruption.

No matter the calendar page, it is always a good time to root out and discard anything that might entice us off the righteous path. And when we do, we make new room for that which builds up and sustains what we truly are now. The second reason for looking back is to decide...

WHAT TO KEEP

In a more logical world the first day of the year would come around March 15, or April 1. New Year's Day—that special day combining nostalgic retrospection for the year just ended with eager anticipation for the year just beginning—seems wasted on a day still mired (at least in this part of the world) in cold air, gray skies, and a frozen landscape. How much better it would be if the new year began on a fresh, sunshine-filled day of spring flowers bursting forth to bring new life, new color to a gray world.

On the other hand, perhaps it is appropriate, after all, that New Year's Day comes during the time of gray-sky melancholy and introspection, for, again, in many ways our time on this path is better spent remembering the days past, than anticipating those days to come.

Our journey upward into Christ-likeness is to be more a study of recent history and current events, than a planning session for the future. Jesus told us this in His Sermon on the Mount.

Read Matthew 6:25.

Meanwhile the Psalmist, David, wrote that when we are in dire straits we can find solace in remembering what God has done for us in the past.

Read Psalm 143:3-6

Certainly the Christian is encouraged to spend happy hours contemplating his or her assured hope of an eternity with God. The rock-solid promise of eternal life in heaven is surely one of Christendom's most precious benefits.

But as believers approach one more year of living on this muddy plane, their focus should be less on what will occur tomorrow than on what transpired yesterday. All of life is a classroom for those who have placed their trust in Christ Jesus; if we forge ahead into a new year without first examining the lessons learned in the previous, we run the risk of being called into the principal's office for a dose of "applied psychology."

The believer should not lightly regard what the Lord has done for him during the preceding year. The point in time when the old wall calendar is replaced with the new is the perfect moment to ask,

- What has the Lord done for me this last year?
- How has He amazed me, and what have I learned from Him?
- What prayers did He answer? (and how did He answer them?)
- How did He solve my moments of confusion with wise, timely counsel?
- How did He prevent me from doing what I shouldn't? (Or how quickly did He forgive me when I did?)
- How often did I experience the calming, healing balm of the Spirit?
- What did He do that took my breath away, and left me filled with His praise?

Every day, in ways both subtle and profound, God works in the Christian's life. Sometimes His hand is dynamic and strong, like the piercing arc of lightning and the thunderous percussion of a storm. We are left gasping from the impact, stunned by His power, grateful that anyone of His supernatural might is on our side.

At other times His hand is gentle and soft, like the butterfly touch of a mother caressing the cheek of her infant child. Often his touch is so delicate that we are not even aware that He is at work; we think He is busy elsewhere, with someone else's problems, when all the time He is only a breath away from ours.

Before the believer moves into the new year, he must also take stock of his own behavior in the previous. Not to bathe himself in the agonies of abasement; not to occupy days on end under the self-wielded lash of castigation. But to use the painful self-examination as one more launch pad of praise to God for His mercy and grace.

Christians are a people most blessed. They have intimate, firsthand knowledge of God's longsuffering and forgiveness. Sadly, however, for one who requires mercy so often, it can become something common; the oft-forgiven believer can become inured to mercy's costly value. So the individual must pause to revive his perspective on God's mercy. He must elevate his view of the daily graces that keep his head above the muck of sin.

The point is not to return to fondle and caress our old transgressions, but to remind ourselves that they were once there: that we erred, but God quickly forgave and restored us. More than that, the point is to review the lessons learned from our mistakes. In both triumph and failure (but mostly in our failures), God teaches us valuable life-lessons that become stair-steps to sanctification. More than the dark act itself, it is the lesson drawn from our sin—along with the resulting forgiveness—that leads us ever upward into Christ-likeness.

It is the review and appreciation of these lessons that causes our next year to be an improvement over the last. We should mark the first day of every new year with the words of Joshua to Israel before they crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land:

Then Joshua said to the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you." (Joshua 3:5)

Now I have found the ground wherein
Sure my soul's anchor may remain,
The wounds of Jesus, for my sin
Before the world's foundation slain;
Whose mercy shall unshaken stay,
When heaven and earth are fled away.

Father, Thine everlasting grace
Our scanty thought surpasses far:
Thy heart still melts with tenderness.
Thy arms of love still open are,
Returning sinners to receive,
That mercy they may taste and live.

O Love, Thou bottomless abyss,
My sins are swallowed up in Thee!
Covered is my unrighteousness,
Nor spot of guilt remains on me,
While Jesus' blood, through earth and skies,
Mercy, free, boundless mercy, cries.

Though waves and storms go o'er my head,
Though strength, and health, and friends be gone,
Though joys be withered all and dead,
Though every comfort be withdrawn,
On this my steadfast soul relies—
Father, Thy mercy never dies.

Johann Andreas Rothe