

12 steps to a GOOD YEAR

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Steps 1 and 2 – Part 1 of a Six Part Series

This letter and the ones that follow in this series are designed to equip you to appropriate the fullness of God’s provision and blessing in the year that lies ahead. The theme I have chosen for this series is the need for making right resolutions. The new year has been traditionally associated with resolutions. Though it is not quite so fashionable today, when I was a boy growing up, at the end of the old year and the beginning of the new year, everybody made good resolutions for the new year—often knowing all too well that their resolutions would not last long. However, I do believe it is appropriate to make or reaffirm resolutions at this time of year. You see, resolutions (or decisions) determine attitudes. Our attitudes determine our approach to a situation. Our approach to a situation determines its outcome.

The way you approach a new year will ultimately determine its outcome in your life. If you have not made the right resolutions, you need to make them. If you have made the right resolutions in the past, it is very helpful to reaffirm them.

The epistle to the Hebrews provides us with twelve pattern resolutions or steps, each introduced by the phrase “Let us.” In the course of this year, I will present two of these steps in each letter. Together they constitute twelve good resolutions for the new year—or, as I prefer to call them, “Twelve Steps to a Good Year.”

In these letters, I hope to show you in detail how each of these twelve resolutions apply to your life and your situation. To begin our study, I want to focus on the significance of the introductory phrase that is used at the beginning of each of

the twelve resolutions: the phrase “Let us.” This phrase contains two important aspects. First of all, it denotes a resolution. Secondly, each time this phrase appears in the epistle to the Hebrews, the resolution is in the plural. That indicates not merely that we have to make certain resolutions, but that we have to make them together. This is a fact which the Holy Spirit is emphasizing in a special way to God’s people at this time. We are not independent, autonomous units, but in a very real sense, we are dependent on one another. If we are going to make it through to the fulfillment of God’s purpose, we are going to do so together. Let me show you a couple of verses in Ephesians chapter 4 that bring out the point that these resolutions are all in the plural: Let us. Paul says that Christ has set in His church ministries for various basic purposes: the edifying of the Body,

the equipping of the saints, and so on. Then Paul sums up the purposes of these ministries.

... until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

EPHESIANS 4:13 NIV

In the same connection, with reference to Christ, he says:

From him [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

VERSE 16 NIV

The emphasis in both those verses is on the collective rather than the individual. Speaking about unity and the full knowledge of the Son of God and maturity, Paul uses the words “we all.” “Until we all reach unity . . . the knowledge of the Son of God. Until we all become mature. Until we all attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” The implication is clear. We’re not going to do it on our own. We are dependent upon our fellow believers. And so the resolution that we make is not just an individualistic, self-centered resolution as to what *I’m* going to do in this New Year, but it is a resolution that includes our fellow believers. “Let us.”

Hebrew believers had a different background from all other New Testament believers. First, they were free from idolatry and false cults by inheritance through the Law of Moses. Second, they had a knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures—the Law, the Psalms, the Proverbs, the prophets, and the historical books. Third, they were familiar with the temple—in its sacrifices and its worship—that addressed the very nature of the true God. But, in many cases, the Hebrew believers had not benefited from these privileges. On the contrary, they had been lulled into a false sense of security which was not justified by their spiritual condition. As a result, the epistle to the Hebrews contains more solemn warnings against the danger of falling away—by drifting, unbelief, negligence, laziness—than any other book in the New Testament. (See Hebrews 2:1–3; 3:12; 6:12; 10:35–36; 12:25, for example.)

The situation of many professing non-Jewish Christians today corresponds to that of the Hebrew believers at the time of the New Testament. We have long enjoyed many special privileges and benefits, but all too often these have not produced in our lives the fruit that God requires. Today we are the ones who need to be warned against such things as drifting, unbelief, negligence, and laziness. I want to suggest that the twelve “Let us” resolutions we will be examining are the remedy to that spiritual condition which has become the inherited spiritual problem of multitudes of professing Christians in Western culture today.

STEP 1: LET US FEAR

Let’s look now at the first “Let us” resolution in Hebrews. If we did not understand the background of the spiritual condition of the Hebrew believers, this first resolution could really take us aback. But in light of that background, we can see that it is appropriate—in fact, absolutely necessary.

Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering [God’s] rest, any of you should seem to have come short of it.

HEBREWS 4:1 NASB

Because of their presumption, their false security, their laziness, and because they had not availed themselves of all the privileges and blessings that they had enjoyed in a special degree, this first admonition was “let us fear.”

The writer to the Hebrews then gave them a specific example of why they should fear based on the experience of the Israelites in their journey through the wilderness from Egypt to the Promised Land. It is a quotation from one of the Psalms—what God said to Israel in connection with their attitude and conduct.

So, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, ‘Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.’ So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’” See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.

HEBREWS 3:7–14 NIV

It is remarkable to note that God brought that whole generation out of Egypt by many miraculous wonders. Nevertheless, because of their subsequent conduct, God was angry with them. The essence of the warning is: “Do not harden your hearts.”

In what, exactly, did that generation fail? The passage makes it clear: They did not hear God’s voice. They were content to get things second-hand through Moses. They had a form of religion: the tabernacle, the Ten Commandments, the priesthood, the sacrifices, and various ceremonial laws. But in all that, they missed the one essential. They failed to hear God’s voice.



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That first resolution is “Let **us** fear.” In other words, it is not restricted to the Israelites in the wilderness. This stands as an example and a warning to us, and it applies still to us today.

Why We Should Fear

Why should we fear? I think the reason is clear in the context. We need to be fearful, very much on our guard, so that we do not make the same mistake the Israelites made in the wilderness. The mistake was focusing on externals and missing the real inner essential—hearing God’s voice.

This principle runs all through the Bible. Jesus says the same to us as His disciples in the New Testament.

“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.”

JOHN 10:27 NASB

That is perhaps the clearest and simplest description of true Christians found anywhere in the New Testament. When Jesus says, “My sheep,” He is speaking about those who truly believe in Him, those whom He acknowledges and accepts as the Good Shepherd. He attributes two traits to His sheep: they hear His voice and they follow Him.

Those traits are true of all real Christians. They hear the Lord’s voice and they follow Him. It is not possible to follow the Lord if you don’t hear His voice. The pattern of shepherd and sheep is very clear. They followed the shepherd because they heard his voice. If they did not hear his voice, they could not follow him.

I want to stress the importance of learning to hear the Lord’s voice. That means having an intimate, personal relationship with the Lord so that He can speak to you directly and personally, whether it is through the Bible or some other way. Jesus didn’t say, “My sheep read the Bible.” It’s a good thing to read the Bible *if* you hear the Lord’s voice. However, many people read the Bible but do not hear the Lord’s voice. It is essential that you hear the Lord’s voice.

If you will make this your first step in this new year, you will be a better person by the end of it. Please accept this as the first resolution. Let’s fear that we don’t make the same mistake that Israel made. Let’s cultivate hearing the Lord’s voice.

STEP 2: LET US BE DILIGENT

The second resolution occurs later in the same fourth chapter of Hebrews: “Let us therefore be diligent.” It reads:

Therefore, let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience.

HEBREWS 4:11 NASB

I pointed out that this warning is based on the experience of the Israelites on their journey from Egypt through the wilderness. Many of them didn’t make it to the promised

destination (the rest that God had promised them) because of their misconduct and their wrong attitude. Scripture says their carcasses fell in the wilderness because of unbelief and disobedience—which caused them to fail to hear the voice of the Lord. They had the externals, but they did not have the great essential, inner reality of all true religion—hearing the voice of the Lord.

That was the tragic mistake of Israel. On the basis of that example of Israel’s failure, the writer of Hebrews says, “Let us be diligent.” I believe that is very natural. If we really take to heart the dangers of that spiritual condition and we do, in that sense, fear, then the next thing we will naturally do is become diligent.

What Is Diligence?

Let’s consider for a moment what diligence is. Sometimes one way to find out the meaning of a word is to consider its opposite. One obvious opposite of diligence is laziness. The Bible doesn’t have one good word to say about laziness. It is a theme that does not receive enough attention in contemporary Christendom. Compare this to what the writer of Hebrews says in chapter 6, verses 11–12:

We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.
NIV

The warning in this passage is that we not only need to be diligent, but we need to be diligent to the very end. We must continue to be diligent. The opposite of diligence is there stated in plain words. It is to become lazy. Not physically lazy, but spiritually lazy. Again, let’s compare that to the words of Peter, where he says:

For this very reason, make every effort [one translation says, “give all diligence”] to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.

2 PETER 1:5–7 NIV



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ISSUE #033

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You see, the Christian life is not a static condition. It is a life of adding—a life of growth and of progress. To be static in the Christian life is to backslide. For you to do that adding, it requires diligence. It requires making every effort.

For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

VERSES 8–9 NIV

Would you believe that possible? That somebody could be cleansed from past sins and then forget it had even happened? But Scripture indicates this is possible. Peter really sets before us two alternatives. The one is to be effective and productive in our knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. The other is to be ineffective and unproductive with a condition that he describes as being nearsighted and blind. Those are strong words. In the light of this, Peter continues:

Therefore, my brothers, [because of the warning Peter gave] be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

VERSES 10–11 NIV

That is good news. We can do something to guarantee that we never fall and that we have a rich welcome into the kingdom of our Lord.

Basically, we are being warned there against laziness. And I am deeply concerned about the lack of concern in Christian circles about laziness. The majority of Christians view drunkenness with horror. They would reject any person professing to be a Christian who was drunk. Now I agree with that attitude—drunkenness is a sin and I would certainly not commend it. But I want to say that laziness is much more severely condemned in Scripture than drunkenness. The problem is that many Christians who

would never be found drunk are habitually lazy. Let's take to heart the warning to be diligent.

Our Part in Blessing

To help us consider more of what is involved in diligence, let me direct you to two beautiful Scriptures in Proverbs that have long been a guiding light to me in my own experience. Together they sum up the two conditions for true riches or enduring wealth. One condition is on the Lord's side; the other condition is on our side. We have to fulfill both conditions to attain the result. On the Lord's side we read:

It is the blessing of the LORD that makes rich, and He adds no sorrow to it.

PROVERBS 10:22 NASB

The great, primary condition for true riches, spiritual and otherwise, is the blessing of the Lord. We cannot count on anything really good apart from the blessing of the Lord. On the other hand, the blessing of the Lord, by itself, is not sufficient. What is our part?

Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.

PROVERBS 10:4 NASB

First of all, the blessing of the Lord makes rich, but second, the hand of the diligent makes rich. It takes the Lord's blessing plus our diligence to attain to true wealth. It is not enough to just expect the blessing of the Lord or even to receive the blessing of the Lord. It will not accomplish its purpose in your life unless you add to it your own personal diligence.

A good way to express that diligence would be the following: in every situation where you have responsibility, leave it in a better condition—spiritually, financially, in every obvious way—than it was when you found it. First and foremost, thank the Lord for His blessing, but add to that your own diligence. Those two together bring true spiritual riches.

In my next Teaching Legacy Letter, I will be looking at the next two "Let us" statements in the book to the Hebrews; namely, *Let us hold fast our confession and let us draw near to the throne of grace.* ▲

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