

12 steps to a GOOD YEAR

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Part 3 of a Six Part Series : Steps 5 and 6

We are continuing our year-long series called “Twelve Steps to a Good Year.” The theme is specially designed to give you good resolutions for this year. Each step is based on a passage from the epistle to the Hebrews that commences with the words, “Let us.” Taken together, these twelve passages constitute twelve scriptural New Year resolutions. In previous editions of this letter series, we have looked at the first four of these resolutions. They were: *Let us fear, let us be diligent, let us hold fast our confession, and let us draw near to the throne of grace.*

STEP 5: LET US PRESS ON TO MATURITY

Now we will look at the fifth resolution, found in Hebrews 6:1:

Therefore, leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity.

NASB

The resolution there is: Let us press on to maturity. It is tremendously important for us to see that we have to do this; we have no other options. Many Christians have the impression that in the Christian life you can somehow “arrive,” settling down and saying, “Now I’m there.” But that is never true in the Christian life. To remain static in

the spiritual life is almost impossible.

One very penetrating verse from Proverbs 4:18 reads:

The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, that shines brighter and brighter until the full day.

NASB

The phrase, “*the path of the righteous,*” is absolutely general. This is not speaking about some particular believer or even some group of believers. It refers to every righteous person.

Notice, first of all, that righteousness is a path. A path is something that we move along. A path is never designed for standing still, much less sitting down. Righteousness, as a path, implies motion. It implies progress and development.

A Path of Light

This path is also like the light of dawn. When we first come to know the Lord in His glorious fullness as Savior and Lord, it is like the sun rising after the darkness. It is like a dawn that comes in our hearts.

That dawn is not the end of God's purposes, however. It is just the beginning. This path is like the light of dawn that shines brighter and brighter until the full day. When we are walking in the path of righteousness, the light should always be getting brighter on our day. With each step and each day, the light should be brighter than it was before. **"Until the full day"** describes our destination. **"The full day"** is the height of noonday. God is not content that we should stop short of that full brightness of the noonday sun. The dawn is our beginning point, the path is the way of progress, and the light gets brighter and brighter. No stopping place is permitted until we reach the full day.

This was the mistake that had been made by the Hebrew believers. That is why this particular **"Let us"** is so appropriate for them. The mistake the Hebrews made was that they trusted their special privileges and rested in them. Frankly, they had become lazy. They were just taking things for granted. This is what the writer says to them in Hebrews 5:11–14:

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

NIV

What the writer is saying there—and he is saying it pretty bluntly—is: "You're just spiritual infants. But you have no right to be infants at this stage in your Christian progress. You've had so many opportunities for so many years—you should have advanced to maturity by now." The writer also explains the only way to advance to maturity when he says, **"Solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."** Advancing to maturity along the path of righteousness in which the light grows brighter day by day comes, in actual practice, by **"constant use"**—by training ourselves. It is not something we can take for granted, and it does not happen automatically. It requires our application. One of the earlier steps we covered was, **"Let us be diligent."** By **"constant use,"** we stay diligent to train ourselves to distinguish good from evil.

It grieves me when I see many Christians who appear to be absolutely unable to distinguish between what is truly spiritual as opposed to some fleshly presentation with soulish appeal. The latter has no real lasting effect, and often no real basis in Scripture. Yet, multitudes of Christians apparently can be taken in by that kind of soulishness. Why? They have not learned to distinguish good from evil. The only remedy is to train ourselves by constant use, by practice. The only alternative to this type of training is arrested spiritual development—remaining in the condition of infants when we should be mature.

God's Provision

What is God's provision for attaining spiritual maturity? God has made a very special provision that we need to know about. It is stated in Ephesians 4:

It was he [that is, the risen, ascended Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 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 4:11–13 NIV

There are five main ministries mentioned there: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

The verses that follow tell us the two purposes of these ministries: The first is that God's people may be prepared for works of service. God's people cannot automatically do the work they are expected to do. They have to be prepared; they have to be trained. These five ministries are there to do it. The second purpose is: **"So that the body of Christ may be built up."**

These five main ministries are placed within the body of Christ to bring us into the unity of the faith and to bring us to maturity. Jesus Christ, as head of the Church, has provided these five ministries so we can attain maturity. Frankly, I believe that God's people will never attain maturity without this provision. Paul says:

From him 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 ultimate goal is not to have a lot of separated, isolated individuals, each one doing his own thing. The goal is a single body, held together by ligaments, by strong bands—a body that is building itself up and growing. It is essential that each part of the body does its work.

That is God's program for coming to maturity. There are two main requirements. First, we must come under the discipline of the God-given ministries Paul has listed: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Without that discipline, oversight, and instruction, I do not see how God's people can ever attain to maturity. Jesus Christ never made a provision that was not important, and I believe this provision is essential.

The second condition is that we must be part of a growing body, not just isolated individuals.

In that same passage Paul states the only alternative—one which is very sad. If we follow God's program for maturity, then we won't have to face the alternative, as given in Ephesians 4:14:

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

NIV

If we fail to come under these ministries, refuse to become part of a body and accept this scriptural discipline, the alternative is: we will remain infants. We will be "tossed back and forth, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching."

I know many believers like that. Every year they have a new fad, a new doctrine, and often a new teacher: **"Blown here and there . . . by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming."** We must come under the discipline of these God-provided ministries. We have to be part of a body. It is the only way to maturity.

STEP 6: LET US DRAW NEAR TO THE MOST HOLY PLACE

The sixth resolution is found in Hebrews chapter 10. We will need to look at several verses in order to get the context.

It is interesting to me that almost every one of these resolutions begins with *therefore*. In other words, it indicates the logical unfolding of a sequence of thought. I believe each major step in the practical application of this sequence is expressed in one of these **"Let us"** statements.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

HEBREWS 10:19–22 NIV

Let's contrast this with the fourth resolution (that we already looked at in part 2 of this series): **"Let us draw near to the throne of grace."** By contrast, this one says, **"Let us draw near to God."** We have to understand it in the context. It is directly related to the statement in Hebrews 10:19: **"Since we have**

confidence to enter the Most Holy Place"—then it says, **"let us draw near to God."** To me, it is clear that drawing near to God is equivalent to entering the Most Holy Place. So I would like to compare these two statements.

Let us draw near to the throne means that we are to come for the help we need—for mercy and grace. But **Let us draw near to the Most Holy Place** is to draw close to God Himself. I believe it takes us much further. The suggestion is not merely that we come to the throne for help, but that we are invited to take our place with Christ on the throne. That is what it means to enter into the Most Holy Place.

The Tabernacle

There is not room here to give a detailed exposition of the tabernacle, but there were three main areas in the tabernacle. There was the Outer Court; and then inside the first curtain of the tent was the Holy Place; and at the end, beyond the second curtain, was the Most Holy Place. The language used in the book of Hebrews is based on the pattern of the tabernacle. Our destination is the Most Holy Place, beyond the second curtain.

The only furniture in the Most Holy Place, as it was designed by God, was just the Ark of the Covenant, which was a box made out of acacia wood that was all covered with gold. It was topped with what was called the Mercy Seat, or the place of propitiation. Inside the Ark were the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, but these were covered up by the Mercy Seat. This indicates that through Christ's propitiation on our behalf, the law has been covered by mercy.

On the ends of the Mercy Seat were two cherubs facing one another. They were looking toward the center of the Mercy Seat with their wings stretched out over them and their wing tips touching in the center.

The Mercy Seat was God's throne. God sits on a throne of mercy. His mercy covers the law. The two cherubs with their faces turned inward toward one another, their wing tips touching, represent the place of fellowship. So, the Mercy Seat is a place of mercy, a place of fellowship—but it is also a throne, the seat of God as King.

There was no representation of God Himself in that piece of furniture—which, of course, was forbidden by Law for

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the Israelites. But God did come to the Most Holy Place and take His place on that seat. He came in the form of the *shekinah* glory—the visible, sensible presence of Almighty God. Without that glory, the Most Holy Place was in total darkness. There was no natural or artificial illumination. But when the *shekinah*, the glorious presence, of God came in, then God was taking His place on the throne.

This sixth “*let us*,” then, invites us into the Most Holy Place. We are invited to draw near to God. We are, in fact, invited to take our place with Christ on the throne. And this passage in Hebrews 10 also tells us that we are to come by “*a new and living way*.” What is the new and living way? It is Jesus. We are to come exactly the same way that He came.

Four Requirements

Speaking about our entrance into the Most Holy Place and approaching the Mercy Seat and the throne, the writer of Hebrews says there are four requirements. Let’s look very briefly at each of those requirements.

1. A sincere heart. We approach God with our heart, not with our head. God is not the answer to an intellectual riddle, but He does meet a longing heart. It must be a sincere heart, without any pretensions or hypocrisy. We have to expose ourselves to God just as we are and not try to cover up anything or pretend to be different than we are. We must be open and honest with God.

2. A full assurance of faith. In the next chapter of Hebrews we read:

But without faith it is impossible to please [God], for he who comes to God must believe. . . .

HEBREWS 11:6 NKJ

So we see that we must come with faith in God’s faithfulness; in other words, not in our own ability or righteousness, but with absolute faith in God’s faithfulness.

3. Our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience. An “*evil conscience*” comes from wrong and sinful deeds that we have committed in the past. Through the blood of Jesus, however, we can receive assurance that all those evil deeds in the past have been forgiven and our hearts are pure from sin. We can have our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience through the blood of Jesus.

4. Our bodies washed with pure water. In his first epistle, John tells us that Jesus came by water and by blood. (See 1 John 5:6.) In these two conditions, we see both elements: the blood that sprinkles from an evil conscience, and the water that washes our bodies. I believe that “water” refers to Christian baptism. In every place where it is explained in the New Testament, Christian baptism is depicted as sharing in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So “*the new and living way*” is Jesus. It is the act of coming and partaking of His death, His burial and His resurrection. We are to be identified with everything that Jesus went through in dying for our sins.

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. . . . and God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

EPHESIANS 2:4–6 NIV

Identification with Jesus

Notice the three stages of identification with Jesus. First, we are “*made alive*.” Second, we are “*raised up*” or resurrected. And third, we are “*seated with Him*.” Where is Jesus seated? On the throne. So what does it mean to be seated with Him? It means to be enthroned—to share the throne with Him.

Once we see our identification with Jesus, we are invited to follow Him all the way. He is the “*new and living way*.” We can be made alive with Him, and we can be resurrected with Him. But we don’t need to stop there. We can also be enthroned with Him.

In the pattern of the tabernacle, the first curtain represents what we enter into through sharing in the resurrection of Jesus. But the second curtain that leads to the Most Holy Place represents what we enter into through sharing in the ascension of Jesus. Jesus was not merely resurrected, but subsequently He was raised up to heaven to the throne. That is where God wants us. God does not want for us to stop short in this new and living way until we have reached the throne—until we are sharing the throne with Jesus, seated with Him in heavenly places. That is our destination.

Let’s make it our resolution this year that we will not stop short of the place where God wants us to come.

In our next letter in this series, we will be looking at the next two steps in this series of resolutions for this year. I hope you will continue to progress in applying these resolutions to your life. ▲

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