

A NEW YEAR'S CHOICE

By Paul Penno Jr.

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Psalm 37:4-6

There are many good people in the world who want to live and let live, to be a help to their neighbors, they are morally upright, but they live with a serious problem: they are victims of an addiction. It may be the addiction of drugs; or the captivity of alcohol.

In some cases (and these too are serious) they are addicted to food and their weight problem is out of control. All kinds of addictions assail us humans; we seek the solution to our problem.

Come January 1, these dear people believe that a New Year's Resolution may help them; so they "resolve" in the next twelve months to rise above their addiction and conquer it. They promise themselves and often their family, "I'm going to lick this problem in this New Year!" "I will do better in this or that way during this new year!"

They are utterly sincere, and their hearts are right; they mean well and the Lord pities them. They look good and our friends and loved ones hope that they will hold; but they don't. In practice, these new year resolutions usually fail before even February comes.

One inquirer asks his pastor: "I always make promises to God and then end up breaking them. I feel terrible after, but I don't know what I can do to

have God forgive me. Do you have any suggestions?"

His pastor replied: "Breaking promises to God is a very human thing to do. We promise God that we will not be hateful, or selfish, or engage in unhealthy activities, and then we do and we feel awful—not only because we know the act is wrong, but because we broke our promise to our creator who loves us."

Someone asks Billy Graham: "Why can't I seem to change my life for the better? I'm always making promises to God about how I'll stop my bad habits and become a better person, but nothing ever seems to last. I've read dozens of books on self-improvement but so far they haven't helped much—P.B.

What they need to know is the truth and to act on that truth, for Jesus said, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). The truth is not the value of our own promises to do and to be good. A wise writer has said, "Your promises and resolutions are like ropes of sand. . . The knowledge of your broken promises and forfeited pledges weakens your confidence in your own sincerity and causes you to feel that God cannot accept you."¹

Does the Bible say anything about New Year's Resolutions? Well, yes. Israel had just come out of Egypt, when the Lord had said to them at Passover time, "This month shall be unto you the beginning of

¹ *Steps to Christ*, p. 47.

months; it shall be the first month of the year to you” (Ex. 12:2).

Shortly afterwards, they made a New Year’s Resolution at Mt. Sinai. In fact, it was something like saying it under solemn oath, for they were making this resolution to God: “All that the Lord hath spoken, WE WILL DO” (19:8). It was like Peter’s resolution, while not New Year’s, was the same time of year: “Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I not be offended” (Mt. 26:33).

In both cases, those who made this New Year’s resolution failed to keep it. Israel got to worshipping a golden calf in a mere matter of days, and in Peter’s case, he was denying his Lord and Saviour in a matter of hours.

Both of those “resolutions” were “old covenant” in principle. And the dear Lord doesn’t want us to get ourselves into old covenant resolutions, for they “gender to bondage,” says Galatians 4:24, that is, they lead us into spiritual slavery.

The little book *Steps to Christ* tells why: “You desire to give yourself to the Lord, but you are weak in moral power, in slavery to doubt, and controlled by the habits of your life of sin. Your promises and resolutions are like ropes of sand. You cannot control your thoughts, your impulses, your affections. The knowledge of your broken promises and forfeited pledges weakens your confidence in your own sincerity, and causes you to feel that God cannot accept you.”² Stop right there. Here’s the

² *Ibid.*

problem! The memory of your frequent failures to keep your promises makes you feel that you are no good and “that God cannot accept you” or respect you. And that is horrible slavery.

Israel’s promise, “All that the Lord hath spoken we will do” (Ex. 19:8). Sounds good, doesn’t it? And some dear people understand the Lord as approving of their making the Old Covenant when He later said, “I have heard the voice of the words of this people . . . They have well said all that they have spoken” (Dt. 5:28). This is often interpreted as the Lord’s enthusiastic approval of their Old Covenant promise. But those who take this position don’t read far enough. In the next verse the Lord sighs, “O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear Me [reverence Me], and keep all My commandments always, that it might be well with them.” Paul says that the Old Covenant “gendereth [produces] to bondage,” just as *Steps to Christ* says (Gal. 4:24). That “bondage” brings darkness into your soul, even though you try ever so hard to be good.

But somebody objects, “All my life I’ve been taught to make promises to God! Aren’t New Year promises good? You can improve yourself that way!”

Making promises to God is not the answer. The problem with making promises to God is that wonderful “I” that makes the promises. “Our beloved brother Paul” again sees through the problem; he says that our “carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7). The solution:

stop relying on that “wonderful I” and begin relying on the Lord’s promises.

The New Covenant in contrast is believing God’s promises to us. A New Year’s Resolution is not the solution; a New Year’s choice is.

Well, there are a few Bible principles that are clear as sunlight: (1) God has NEVER asked anyone to make promises to Him; rather, repeatedly He asks us to believe HIS promises to us. (2) Abraham is “the father of all who believe” (Rom. 4:11). He made no promises to God in return for God’s great promises to him (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:5, 6). The faith of Abraham, true listening and heeding, true heart-appreciation, always leads to full and true obedience to God’s law. The doing always follows the heart-believing.

Ellen White’s use of the word “pledge” must therefore mean heart “commitment,” the same response as Abraham’s. He made no vain promise. He never said, “Lord, I’ll be good; I’ll do everything just right; You can depend on me!” He believed God’s promise, and the Lord counted his faith for righteousness.

(3) But he did make a response to believe: “And he believed in the Lord, and the Lord counted it to him for righteousness.” The Hebrew word translated “believe” is AMEN. That’s all that God asked Abraham to do, and since he is our “father,” it proves that is all He asks us to do—BELIEVE.

(4) The meaning of the word BELIEVE is a heart-response of gratitude that is deep. The result is obedience to all the commandments of God, not through fear of punishment or hope of reward, but

through appreciating the love of Christ (2 Cor. 5:14, 15).

(5) The very act of making promises to God is not only useless, but is far from being an innocent vanity. It is actually harmful to the soul, because whoever makes the promise becomes the source of the righteousness. In other words, making promises to God is self-righteousness, and that is why God has never asked us to do it. He has asked us to CHOOSE to serve Him. But if God is the One who makes the promise to make us righteous, then HE is the Source of the righteousness. If WE make the promises, we become the source. And we don’t have the righteousness in ourselves.

For generations, we have assured our children, “Yes, the Lord will bless you; He will do this or that for you, *provided you first do your part!*” Thus the basic idea that gets across is that the Lord is like a policeman or a highway patrol officer; He won’t bother you if you keep out of trouble. Or He is like a bank that won’t give you a dime unless you have made a deposit first. It’s up to you to initiate the relationship with Him, and up to you to maintain it; and if you don’t, then too bad; He does nothing for you. The emphasis is on what you do to initiate salvation for yourself, not on what *He* has done and is doing to save you.

What is the inevitable result? Attention on self, and that leads to fear and alienation from Christ. And then—discouragement and wandering away. Paul says that the old covenant “gives birth to bondage” (Gal. 4:24). It always does!

It may be self-humbling to confess that we haven't taught our children the pure gospel, but it is worth the upheaval this realization may bring us. It's not too late to proclaim the new covenant to those who have lost their way. And in the meantime let's be sure to give the new covenant to the children of today! They must know that Christ is their Saviour 100%; He has taken the initiative to save them and has also initiated a loving relationship with them; they need to know it and believe it! Further, He maintains the relationship unless we drive Him off.

Many a smoker or alcoholic in ignorance has knelt and promised with tears, "God, I'll never do it again!" only to be disheartened by repeated failures. Better to pray, "Father, I don't have what it takes to quit, but I choose to BELIEVE Your promise to be my Savior. Thank You for delivering my soul!" Now, choose to say NO to the temptation. His grace is sufficient for you.

A prayer to pray may go like this: "Father in heaven, thank You for giving me another New Year; thank You for loving me so much that you gave Your Son to me to be my Savior; yes, I do believe—but "help Thou mine unbelief." Those are the words of the distraught father in Mark 9:24 whose son was devil afflicted; Jesus had promised him "all things are possible to him that believeth."

The poor father set the stage for all of us: "Lord, I believe" he responded; but then immediately begged for forgiveness, (as must we) for he added, "help Thou mine unbelief."

There is one VERY difficult thing about being saved: that is, learning how to believe. Jesus says

in John 3:17-19 that NOT believing will keep us out of heaven. Indeed! Serious! And the truth is that all of us were born in an unbelieving state; believing is never transmitted genetically; unbelief is natural to us; unbelieving is far and above the most difficult thing humans have to learn to overcome. It is the addiction of all addictions, the most insidious, the most pervasive. "He that believeth not is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (vs. 18).

The distraught father in Mark 9:17-24 shows us how deep the problem is rooted in our human nature. Jesus said to him, almost like tantalizing him, "All things are possible to him that believeth." Then the poor man realized how awful his problem was, how every cell of his being was saturated with unbelief: he burst into tears and cried out in anguish, "Lord I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

Now, there is Good News in that story. The moment you realize that unbelief is your real problem, help is on the way. A wise writer said, "you can never perish" if from your heart you pray that man's prayer. The people above all people whom Heaven rushes to help are those who realize the depths of their sin. Unbelief is the most serious problem in the world church, the source of our lukewarmness, the reason for the delay in the coming of Jesus. We MUST learn to believe how good the Good News is; and the moment we say that, we remember that Christ will have a people who will overcome even as He overcame. He did

not die in vain! He will see of the travail of His soul and will be satisfied (Isa. 53:11).

It is not by our own works and trying hard that our robes “must be spotless,” our “characters . . . purified from sin.” No; it is by “the blood of sprinkling,” getting close to that cross so we “feel the blood so freely shed” for us:

O for a heart to praise my God,
A heart from sin set free;
A heart that always feels Thy blood
So freely shed for me!”

Charles Wesley

It’s all the way through the grace of God, which of course we must “receive not in vain.” Our own diligent effort is always simply cooperating with the agencies that Heaven employs. “Through faith in the atoning blood of Christ” this marvelous work will be accomplished. And there we come back to that cross again.

And what is faith? According to John 3:16, it is our heartfelt response to God’s loving and giving in our behalf. “Faith in his blood” (Romans 3:25) is the effectual agency in righteousness by faith. Here is a definition:

“Many accept Jesus as an article of belief, but they have no saving faith in him as their sacrifice and Saviour. They have no realization that Christ has died to save them from the penalty of the law which they have transgressed. . . . Do you believe that Christ, as your substitute, pays the debt of your transgression? Not, however, that you may continue in sin, but that you may be saved from your sins. . . .

“You may say that you believe in Jesus, when you have an appreciation of the cost of salvation. You may make this claim, when you feel that Jesus died for you on the cruel cross of Calvary; when you have an intelligent, understanding faith that his death makes it possible for you to cease from sin, and to perfect a righteous character through the grace of God, bestowed upon you as the purchase of Christ’s blood.”³

Do you begin to see something of the tremendous power of faith? Not that faith itself does anything—*Jesus* does it. But *righteousness is by faith*, and what it leads to is “to cease from sin, and to perfect a righteous character.” A thoughtful writer has said: [No wonder Waggoner exclaimed in 1889, again only a few days after his presentations in Minneapolis]:

“What wonderful possibilities there are for the Christian! To what heights of holiness he may attain! No matter how much Satan may war against him, assaulting him where the flesh is weakest, he may abide under the shadow of the Almighty, and be filled with the fulness of God’s strength. The One stronger than Satan may dwell in his heart continually.”⁴

Faith is making choices motivated by the cross of Christ. “What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is

³ *Review and Herald*, July 24, 1888.

⁴ *Signs of the Times*, January 21, 1889.

theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can choose to serve Him. You can give Him your will; He will then work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure. Thus your whole nature will be brought under the control of the Spirit of Christ; your affections will be centered upon Him, your thoughts will be in harmony with Him.”⁵

[At the 1893 General Conference session Jones explained] Here is the simple, practical ministry of the Lord, what He is doing, in this time of the cleansing of the sanctuary:

“He gave himself for our sins; but . . . He will not take our sins although He bought them—without our *permission*. . . . The choice is forever with me as to whether I would rather have my sins than to have Him, isn’t it? [Congregation: ‘Yes.’] . . . Then from this time henceforth can there be any hesitation about letting anything go that God shows is sin? Will you let it go when it is pointed out? When sin is pointed out to you, say, ‘I would rather have Christ than that.’ And let it go. [Congregation: ‘Amen.’] Just tell the Lord, ‘Lord, I make the choice now; I make the trade; make Thee my choice; it is gone, and I have something better.’ . . . Where in the world is the opportunity for any of us to get discouraged over our sins?

“Now some . . . came here free; but the Spirit of God brought up something they never saw before. The Spirit of God went deeper than it ever went before, and revealed things they never saw before;

⁵ *Steps to Christ*, p. 47.

and then, instead of thanking the Lord that that was so, and letting the whole wicked business go and thanking the Lord that they had ever so much more of Him than they ever had before, they began to get discouraged. They said, ‘Oh what am I going to do? My sins are so great.’ . . .

“If the Lord has brought up sins to us that we never thought of before, that only shows that He is going down to the depths, and He will reach the bottom at last; and when He finds the last thing that is unclean or impure, that is out of harmony with his will, and brings that up, and shows that to us, and we say, ‘I would rather have the Lord than that’—then the work is complete, and the seal of the living God can be fixed upon that character. [Congregation: ‘Amen’]

“Which would you rather, have the completeness, the perfect fullness, of Jesus Christ, or have less than that, with some of your sins covered up that you never know of? . . . How in the world can that seal of God, which is the impress of His perfect character revealed in us, be put upon us when there are sins about us? He cannot put the seal, the impress of His perfect character, upon us until He sees it there. And so He has got to dig down to the deep places we never dreamed of, because we cannot understand our hearts. . . . He will cleanse the heart, and bring up the last vestige of wickedness. Let Him go on, brethren; let him keep on His searching work. . . .

“If the Lord should take away our sins without our knowing it, what good would it do us? That would simply be making machines of us. . . .

“We are always intelligent instruments—not like . . . a pick or a shovel. . . . We are *intelligent*

instruments. We will be used by the Lord at our own living *choice*.⁶

This is what Paul speaks of when he says:

“How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (Heb. 9:14).

Ellen White firmly supports this tremendous idea: “Your circumstances have served to bring new defects in your character to your notice; but nothing is revealed but that which was in you.”⁷ “His eye . . . searches every chamber of the mind searches every chamber of the mind, detecting all lurking self-deception.”⁸ “Undiscovered traits of character . . . must come to light.”⁹ “God . . . reveals their hidden defects. . . . the moral machinery of their own hearts.”¹⁰ “In the closing up of the great day of atonement . . . the remnant church . . . are fully conscious of the sinfulness of their lives.”¹¹ The sanctuary ministry is a type of removing previously unconscious sin from the heart; the Crucifixion of Christ is man’s deepest, unconscious sin; and the final judgment will disclose the hidden content of the unrepentant sinner’s *unconscious* mind.¹²

⁶ *Bulletin*, pp. 404, 405.

⁷ Ellen G. White, “A Lively Hope, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (August 6, 1889).

⁸ Ellen G. White, *That I May Know Him*, p. 284.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *In Heavenly Places*, p. 273.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 322.

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *Prophets and King*, p. 588.

¹² *Review and Herald*, August 6, 1889; *That I May Know Him*, p. 290; *Testimonies*, Vol. 7, pp. 210, 211; Vol. 4, p. 85; Vol. 5, pp. 472, 473; *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 201, 202,

If you are under a cloud of fear, or not sure if the Lord accepts you, you do not understand His discipline, you feel like you are on the outside, you know you have sinned and you do not deserve His blessings, the party is going on inside and you feel “thrust into outer darkness,” the Father has commissioned His Son Jesus to minister especially for you:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,” He says, “because He hath appointed Me to preach the gospel [good news] to the poor; He hath sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18, 19).

Even Christ’s enemies confessed that He “receiveth sinners” (15:2). The last page of the Bible welcomes all who are “thirsty” (Rev. 22:17). David has written the exact prayer for all to pray who feel that they are unworthy sinners: it’s Psalm 51; read it, on your knees.

“But there are so many things I must do and I don’t know how to do them all.” Well, two things in Hebrews 11:6: (1) you must believe that God exists, and (2) you must believe that “He is a Rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.” That is, that He is faithful love.

“But that’s my problem: I don’t know how to believe. I was born and bred in unbelief.” Wait a moment: God has already given you “a measure of faith” (Rom. 12:3), the gift of believing; no one can

357, 358; *The Desire of Ages*, p. 58; *Review and Herald*, June 12, 1900; November 10, 1896.

ever say that God has deprived him of faith! He has given you exactly the amount you need for eternal salvation. Now, choose to believe. But maybe it's as difficult for you as it was for the poor father of the devil-tormented son in Mark 4. He had come to the ordained pastors of the church (yes, the nine disciples at the foot of the mountain in Matthew 17) and they had failed to help him and he was distraught with a terrible fear (you would be, too, if the Lord's own disciples, some of the Twelve, had pronounced your case hopeless!).

And then the Lord Jesus appears to dangle a great blessing before him, IF—"all things are possible to him that believeth" and in a burst of honesty you also cry out "with tears. . . . Help Thou mine unbelief." Your deliverance is: "Lord, I believe . . ." (9:17-24, KJV). You confess the battle raging in your soul: you believe and at the same time you disbelieve. Now, in the face of the most discouraging outlook, choose to believe. Let the tears come—that father cried and cried; then choose again. You can never perish while you pray that simple prayer; people wiser than I have said so.¹³

A New Year's resolution is not your solution; a New Year's choice and a New Year's prayer is.

¹³ "Cast yourself at His feet with the cry, 'Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.' You can never perish while you do this—never." *The Desire of Ages*, p. 429.