

THE NEW BIRTH FOR A NEW YEAR

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The question, How old is the earth? is a fascinating study. And how long will it be until Jesus keeps His promise, “I will come again” (John 14:3)?

What the Bible says is squarely against the theory of macro-evolution: by adding up the life-spans of the antediluvian patriarchs (from Adam to Noah), and the subsequent Bible history so there is a total picture from Creation to the first coming of Christ, the sum comes to 4000 years—plus or minus a little according to interpretations of minor details by various scholars. This has been the view of most Bible students for several hundred years. Adding the years since *Anno Domini*, the birth of Christ the Savior of the world, the total is about 2000, in fact, a bit more, making roughly a grand total of 6000 since the Bible story of Creation.

Yes, scientists laugh; but there are the stark realities—either you believe the Bible or you believe the theory of evolution (that’s all it is!). There are competent scientists in all the fields of natural science who do believe the Bible record of God’s creation in a literal six days and its subsequent history; add to this the fact that Jesus believed it as well as His apostles.

He must have known the truth about the creation of man “in the beginning.” He says: “Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and

shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?” (Matt. 19:4, 5). His disciples then asked about the present evil of divorce, why the obvious corruption of what had “in the beginning” been “very good.” He replied: “From the beginning it was not so” (verse 8). Thus Jesus taught that there was once a *perfect* creation.

Add the fact that millions of kind-hearted, unselfish, loving people believe the Bible and cherish “the blessed hope” of Jesus’ second coming just like the Bible says. Add all this together and you have plenty of evidence on which to base a reasonable faith. The alternative: a despairing world view.

One highly respected Christian writer, Ellen G. White, has written 40 or more times that the second coming of Christ will come within this period of 6000 years, implying that the “millennium” of Revelation 20 will be a “Sabbath” of “rest” for a weary and worn-out planet before the joyous re-creation of a “new heavens and new earth” of Revelation 21, 22. But the 6000 years are already up! Are we living in the biblical “millennium” now, or will we be when the next New Year rolls around?

Obviously, no. The best answer to such questions is: (1) God’s word predicts a trial of faith known as a “tarrying time” (Hab. 2:3; Matt. 25:5; Heb. 10:37). Be patient! (2) Remember that whenever Jesus comes and “the door [for saving more people] is shut,” you and I will wish we had done more to give people the Good News (Matt. 25:10). (3) Be thankful you have one more day in which to

prepare, and to share with somebody somewhere a morsel of the Bread of Life.

New Year's Day is traditionally the time for resolutions. "I will do better in this or that way during this new year!" And in practice, these New Year's resolutions usually fail before even February comes. 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 Such promises and resolutions made to God are the famous Old Covenant.

Israel had just come out of Egypt, when the Lord had said to them (Passover time), "This month shall be unto you the beginning of 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 a New Year's resolution: "Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I not be offended" (Matt. 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.

¹ *Steps to Christ*, p. 47.

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 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. A far better way to face the New Year is under the "new covenant." Instead of promising God you will do better, thank Him that He has promised to save you, that Christ has given Himself for you already and bought you with His blood, and that you are precious in His sight. The new covenant is Good News, the "old" is bad.

What is the good news? "The goodness of God leads you to repentance" (Rom. 2:4).

Sometimes sick people need something more than medicine. A man sick of the palsy was one day brought to Jesus. His four friends had to break up

² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

the tile roof in order to lay him down at His feet. The sufferer did not ask for anything, not even healing. When Jesus saw him, He recognized that he was suffering from guilt. He said, “Son, thy sins be forgiven thee.”

Oh, how that poor man’s face shone with happiness and peace! Now he was not afraid to die, for the awful burden that had been crushing out his life was lifted. But Jesus took another step. He commanded the sufferer to pick up his bed and walk away (see Mark 2:1-12).

Being “born again” is not a do-it-yourself project. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit . . . The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:6, 8).

One cannot know when or how the Holy Spirit first began to work on his heart. The “wind” is forever blowing seeds of heavenly truth into minds and hearts. No one is wise enough to tell where they come from, for the grace of God has been working on human hearts in multitudinous ways ever since time began. What parents have said, friends, songs of praise, Bible messages heard or read, sermons, expressions of true love—all can be ways that the Holy Spirit uses to plant “Good News” ideas in the heart.

The seed of truth was sown. These “seeds” may lie there deep, unrecognized for years, but they are certain to germinate because each one has within itself the mysterious principle of eternal life. Each

“seed” of Good News truth “is the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16).

Here is another illustration of how the divine word of truth accomplishes its purpose:

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:10, 11, NIV).

Christ’s illustration of the wind blowing “wherever it pleases” is a picture of God’s compassionate concern for every person. As surely as you have felt the wind blowing on your cheek, so surely is the Holy Spirit trying to convert you. “God does not show favoritism” (Acts 10:34, NIV).

It is exciting, for at times you can almost feel those seeds of truth germinating within your soul like a pregnant woman can feel the baby growing within her. She is thrilled with new life forming. What greater joy to experience something even more wonderful—“I’m being born again!”

But if the new birth is so easy, why isn’t everybody born again? The answer is clear: many, perhaps the majority, practice a form of new-birth-abortion. They are endlessly snuffing out the new life that the Spirit of God imparts.

This is disclosed in Stephen’s words to the Jewish leaders of his day. They were only doing what comes naturally to unconverted human nature: “You stiff-necked people ... ! You are just like your

fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!” (Acts 7:51, NIV).

It’s active alienation or enmity against God. It doesn’t make sense to do that, but let’s face reality—that’s what we do. It’s like starving people diligently uprooting every little food-bearing plant that comes up out of the ground. It’s crazy!

Jesus told a parable to illustrate the fate that most of His seeds of truth meet. “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants” (Matt. 13:3-7, NIV).

He went on to explain His story. The farmer represents Himself, sowing His seeds of “Good News” truth in all human hearts everywhere through the work of the Holy Spirit, the “wind.” But, He says, “this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes” (verse 15, NIV). It’s no use sowing seed in earth packed beneath the tread of multitudes in the path. Even if plenty of seeds fall on hard hearts, they cannot take root.

Some “seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” This is “the man who hears the word and understands it,” Jesus explained (Matt. 13:8, 23, NIV). He is the one who believes the Good News, who receives it, welcomes it, cherishes it.

He lets it get into his heart instead of inviting the birds by the wayside to snatch it up, or letting the thorns choke it out, or leaving hidden “rocks” of cherished lust to dwarf its roots. He simply does not perform an abortion of unbelief to kill it. This is a Good News view of Jesus’ parable.

No one has yet seen what is the dynamic factor that produces the new birth, because love can never be seen. Jesus told Nicodemus in advance the story of His cross, which of course he couldn’t understand that night. But what he heard stayed deep in his mind until he saw what happened; then it all came together, and he stepped out of his closet to identify openly with Christ.

Jesus explained further: “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:13-15, NIV).

He alludes to something that happened during Israel’s wilderness wanderings. The people were journeying through the desert to their Promised Land (yes, there were hardships). But true to form for all of us humans, they had to make their difficulties worse by believing bad news: “The people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert?’” (Num. 21:4, 5, NIV). They were not about to die, for God was leading them; this was a specter of doom that they themselves invoked, without reason (see Ps. 105:37). Their doubt became pure

unbelief, borrowing troubles that were only figments of their faithless imagination. But to do so was sin.

The people's sinful unbelief and murmuring had deprived them of God's special protection which would have been theirs by right. Moses' making a snake of brass and holding it up high on a pole was an acted prophecy of Christ to be uplifted on His cross.

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' ... Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived" (Num. 21:8, 9, NIV).

But how could a poisonous snake represent Him? Here is the answer: He was "made ... to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:21, KJV). We see how close Christ has come to us. He never sinned, but He identified with us so closely that He "took" our fallen, sinful nature. He was "made" to be something that He was not. In that reality is our salvation from the "serpents."

How easy the healing was: all the people had to do was look. Jesus is telling Nicodemus: there is something to see on that cross—look. But it is more than gazing at a crucifix. "Looking" is believing in the sense of a heart appreciation of what it cost the One who died there to "be made sin for us," and save us. (It meant that He died the death that we have deserved.)

An appreciation of what He did is what brings healing to a sin-sick person. And, of course, healing is exactly the same as that new birth.

Then Jesus spoke the well-known words that have become the most loved verse of the entire Bible: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16, NIV).

Obviously, the power is in the One on that cross, not in its wooden beams. How can believing or appreciating God's act of loving and giving do anything to change sinful hearts?

One of Christ's followers made it clear how it worked for him. He expresses it as a principle that operates in everyone who will look and say, "Thank You" for what He accomplished. Paul was defending himself against the charge that his all-out devotion to Christ was virtual insanity. He was going through incredible hardships and persecutions for Christ's sake, but almost incredibly, he sang for joy as he went along.

The idea that he was sacrificing anything seems not to have crossed his mind. On and on he went through scourgings (and one lethal stoning!), imprisonments, fastings, cold and nakedness, shipwrecks, hunger, weariness. His career as a missionary went on for decades, even into old age. Why not restrain his self-sacrificing devotion, and settle down and enjoy a well-earned retirement? Wasn't it time for Paul to begin looking out for "number one"?

No, not for him. He says: "If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; or if we are of sound mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died [that is, all would be dead if He had not died

for them; and so closely are we identified with Christ that when He died, we died too]; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again (2 Cor. 5:13-15).

Here we see what it has seemed impossible to understand. Paul was not a better person than we are, nor more heroic. He simply saw something that made all his sacrifices easy: He saw that he would be in a hopeless grave if that “One” had not died in his place. He saw that even his next breath he owed to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. He saw himself a slave bought by love, responding to the blood shed there. He saw that nothing he possessed he could count as really his.

“There is but one thing in this world that a man needs and that is justification—and justification is a fact, not a theory. It is the gospel. That which does not tend to righteousness is of no avail, and not worthy to be preached. Righteousness can only be attained through faith; consequently all things worthy to be preached must tend to justification by faith.”³

By the simple process of joining together the corporate justification by faith idea that Paul teaches in Romans and Galatians together with the unique Seventh-day Adventist idea of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary (that began in 1844). Voila! There was the beginning of the light of the latter rain message. The two had stumbled on the discovery of the ages. New spiritual surveyance

³ E. J. Waggoner, *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, March 11, 1891, p. 74.

wonders are seen in “the breadth, and length, and depth, and height” of the love [*agape*] of Christ revealed in His atoning sacrifice.

Justification by faith is not a cerebral, theological exercise; it’s the joy of living. And part of the joy of living is the joy of giving. Yes, actually learning to enjoy giving more than getting. Why and how? Because in true justification by faith you come to realize that you own nothing that can rightfully be called yours. You don’t need a preacher to pound it into your ears that you are a steward, an estate-manager. You see that on His cross Christ took what was yours (your grave) and gave you what was His (eternal life). Yes, He redeemed you from hell itself!

Simply believe this truth of justification, and you are set free from those terrible tentacles of “covetousness,” which is selfishness, the desire to acquire and to keep. Get on your knees, and ask the Lord where and how to give, rather, to pass on, what He has permitted to pass through your unworthy hands. Give, not because you hope it’s an investment that will pay off in “treasure in heaven” for you or because you want to receive (Matt. 6:20); give because you want to help lift the burden that Jesus carries on His heart by lifting someone else’s burden that He feels. Just for the joy of helping. Yes, He will guide you to give wisely, not unwisely.

Let it come into your heart. Let it take root. Don’t practice abortion on it. Cherish it. Plead with God with all your soul for His gift of faith. He has promised to give you every tiny bit that you are willing to cherish.

There can be no such thing as bad news unless we ask for it, or choose it, and thus willfully bring on ourselves a final verdict of choosing darkness after we have seen Light.

This is illustrated in a man who committed crime after crime in an effort to cover up his first mistake. Worst of all, he did nothing to prevent an innocent man from being sent to prison when he himself should have been the one jailed. As so often happens to a criminal, he lost his sense of fairness and kindness, and his wife and children left him. His home was ruined. Yet that hard-hearted man would not repent. He insisted: "I cannot, I will not, I dare not, I must not!"

Finally the innocent man who was wrongfully in prison did an unusual thing. He wrote the hard-hearted man a letter, forgiving him for all the wrong he had done to him. Can you imagine? That letter broke the heart of that evil man and brought him to repentance and confession of his crimes. He said, "All the troubles that came to me failed to bring me to repentance; but when I was forgiven, I repented." Fear can never drive you to be a better person, but realizing that you are forgiven—that does it.