

“Resolutions”

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Opening Prayer

Good Morning, you made it! If you are listening to this, or reading it, or are watching it online, then you have successfully made it through 2020. Congrats, and a happy New Year to you and yours. A new year Beloved is a wonderful time for us mixed with a hint of sadness. Usually, we are a touch sad about some of the things that we have left behind. For those of us who have lost someone, a new year marks the first year without that person. It also marks another year of age, another year full of challenges and hidden joys, another year of unknowns. We leave behind the holiday season to embark on something brand new, and in that newness there is some joy isn't there? A good way to look at the new year is to not wonder about what difficulties we will face, but to wonder about the joys the Lord will bring. Will we see a new member join the family through birth or marriage? Will this be the year that one of our lifelong goals comes true? Will I stick to my resolutions this year? Who knows Beloved, other than the Lord. This year very well may be a joyful year, perhaps the most joyful of your life. While we cannot control all that will happen to us this year, there are things that the Lord has given us control over. In a time that is filled with resolutions about all sorts of things, perhaps this will be the year that you will finally take that next step in your faith. That is fully within your hands.

Resolutions... even that word brings up a bunch of images right? New Year's resolutions to lose weight and get in shape are the quintessential thing at the beginning of the year. As avid gym goers, Rhianna and I can attest that the first two weeks of a new year come with a packed gym. People who make that choice to get in shape, to make that change, and immediately fall off the bandwagon within days of starting. The key word for a resolution to actually stick is a part of the very word. For a resolution to work, it requires “resolve.” Without resolve, grit, gumption, dedication, discipline, and will power that resolution is only a short term thing. For a resolution to work it has to be a lifestyle and a dedicated choice, it has to be something that is made a center part of who we are. We have to love that choice, or we won't stick with it. That is true for getting in shape, and it is true in regards to our faith. Getting your faith in shape is very much possible, and with a little resolve you can grow as a Christian. Our reading from Psalm 119 gives us a blueprint into how to have that resolve.

First off, if you have not read Psalm 119 all the way through, I highly encourage you to take some time and read it. The portion we read today is a start, but the whole thing is exceptional. All of it gives us a clue into how we are to act and pray and even speak to ourselves as Christians. Verse 50 starts us off strong, stating “This is my comfort in my affliction, that Your word has revived me.” Our basis as Christians comes from our faith in Christ right? Our source of comfort and hope and peace when all else has faded is only found in Jesus right? But holding fast to that faith and strengthening it is accomplished by resolving to do what we know will benefit it. This Psalm, which is again like one big long prayer, is an affirmation of the writer into what they do to keep the faith secure and grow in it.

“I have remembered Your ordinances from of old, O Lord, and comfort myself.” The writer understands that the ordinances, the laws and scriptures, from the Lord are where comfort is found. “O Lord, I remember Your name in the night, and keep Your law.” The writer remembers, even when it is difficult, who the Lord is and worships Him all the time in prayer and deed. Perhaps the most important verse that is given in the first section here (in “Zayin”) is in verse 56 where it states “This has become mine, that I observe Your precepts.” This has become mine is another way of saying “This defines me,” or “This is who I am.” Following the Lord is not a part of who he is, it is this person’s defining feature. Could the same be said of us? Have we resolved to internalize the Lord not as an extra component of our lives. There is a difference between “Jim is a truck driver, a wonderful father, an avid golfer, and goes to church” versus “Jim is a Christian who drives truck, is a wonderful father, and golf avidly.” In one Jim’s faith is auxiliary, in the other it defines who he is and explains in part what he does. That phrase, “This has become mine” should apply to us in regards to our faith. But how do you get to that place?

In “Heth” the writer gives us some clues about what has brought his resolution to follow the Lord into fruition. Fifty-seven reads “The Lord is my portion; I have promised to keep Your words.” He promised to follow the Lord. “I sought Your favor with all my heart...” He seeks the Lord’s favor. Although the Lord loves you, it takes effort to follow Him Beloved. The writer here acknowledges that, and indeed if we want to grow in our faiths, it takes effort. Nobody grows as an artist or an athlete or anything else without effort. Being a solid Christian takes effort. “I considered my ways and turned my feet to Your testimonies. I hastened and did not delay to keep Your commandments.” The writer thinks about what the Lord desires, and he acts accordingly. Furthermore he hastens to go do the things that the Lord prompts him to do, to keep those commandments. We just went through a series on the Ten Commandments before Advent, and we examined the basis of morality for us that exists in those ten laws. To hold true to the Lord, to grow as a Christian, does not necessarily mean that we become perfect... but it does mean that we work on those sins in our lives. This requires self-reflection, or understanding. If we connect that to our resolutions it might make a bit more sense. If you take that New Year’s resolution to work out, for example, if you plan to stick with it you need to really reflect on why you want to in the first place. If it is a generic “I want to be fitter” or “I want to be skinnier” that isn’t really going to prompt you to stick with it. You won’t get up at 5am or be willing to push past soreness if you don’t understand really why you are doing it. Knowledge like exercise leads to more time with my kids, I can do more in my later years, it tends to make one sleep better and be more productive... those things hold way more merit. The same is true in our Christian lives when it comes to resolving to be better faith-wise. We have to know those actual benefits beyond just “I want to be closer to God.”

In “Teth” we can see that the Psalmist acknowledges a lot about the Lord he is praying to, and mixed with that are his pledges to resolutely follow the Lord. “You have dealt well with Your servant” is followed by “Teach me good discernment and knowledge, for I believe in Your commandments.” “You are good and do good” is followed by “Teach me Your statutes.” Knowing the Lord’s work, understanding Him, leads to wanting to get to know Him and grow in

the faith more. Acknowledging that He has already done great work in creating us, in saving us from our sins, and in watching over us even when we don't recognize it should prompt us to want to know more. You will never know everything about the Lord. Your faith will never be so great that it won't have room to grow. That is true whether you are someone who is a brand new Christian or if you have been a Christian your whole life... you always should be able to identify with the Psalmist's prayers here to want to be taught good discernment and to learn the statutes. We should strengthen our resolve, knowing that this is a lifestyle and not a day's journey. The Psalmist even acknowledges that sticking fast to his discipline in the Lord when it is difficult is beneficial and necessary for growth. "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes." No one ever gets fit from sitting on the couch wanting to be fit. No one ever gets their college degree by thinking they should study sometime. No one becomes a better Christian by not reading their Bible, or praying, or taking the time to understand His word, or not working on their flaws, or not interacting with Him. If we want to grow in our faith, if we want to strengthen our relationship with the Lord this year and years beyond, the tools are in our hands. There is no mystery or rocket science behind this, becoming a better Christian is the natural outcome from knowing the benefits and wanting it bad enough.

Beloved, as we talk about resolutions that is the question that I hope we all (including myself) will ponder as we leave here this morning. Knowing what we know about Christ, where to find Him and what He has done and what we must do in order to grow, do we want it bad enough? Do we want to be better Christians in 2021 than we were in 2020? Do we want to be closer to God next week, next month, next year, next decade than we are now? Do we want to know His love inside and out? Do we want to have such a close personal relationship with our Lord that those around us can't help but take notice? Do we want to be so interconnected with our eternal Creator's traits seep out of us and influence everyone and everything around us in a positive way? Do we want this faith to define us, or are we ok with less? Beloved I pray that we would resolve to change our faiths for the better this year. Practically speaking, if you haven't read through a Gospel (or all four), then resolve to read through them. If you haven't prayed a Psalm a day before, do it. If you have felt that tug on your heart from the Lord to do something for His kingdom, take the first step. This is your chance, this is the time. If you wait to start these things until next week, you will never get there. If you resolve to get closer to the Lord, in your heart, in your mind, in your actions, then rest assured that you will get what you desire. To close us out I am going to read "Yodh" for us again... this time as a prayer. I invite you to pray this along with me as we close the sermon, listening to and praying the words with me. God willing this will apply to us as we step into a new year.

Closing Prayer (Psalm 119:73-80)