

CHURCH. SUPPLEMENT 3

[CHURCH FESTIVAL]

THE NEW YEAR'S FESTIVAL: THE DAY OF REVIEW AND COMMITMENT

Introduce. The New Year's Festival is important to many people. We will learn how Christians may celebrate the beginning of a new year. We will learn the importance of examining ourselves with respect to the past year. And we will learn the importance of making the right decisions and choices with respect to the new year. We will also learn the importance of involving God in every beginning we make.

Psalm 90:10-12 says, "The length of our days is seventy years - or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." Every New Year's Festival reminds people everywhere on earth that their time on earth is limited, that also this new year will end and soon they will arrive at the end of their lives. Every New Year's Festival is an opportunity for people to evaluate the past year and to make some important decisions for the coming year. A Christian family or group of friends could spend some time during the evening of the last day of the old year to personally consider some important questions.

The Bible is a book which tells you about 'the beginning' of all the important things. It reveals that God existed in the beginning. It relates the beginning of the created universe, the beginning of mankind, the beginning of God's purpose and the beginning of man's task on earth.

But the Bible also reveals *the end* of all things. It relates the end of this world with all its countries and governments at the second coming of Jesus Christ. Then Jesus Christ will judge every person who ever lived according to their relationship to Jesus Christ and how they lived. Christians are therefore reminded that God is the Beginning and the End of all things. They are reminded that they can only make a good beginning for the next year with the living God and that they can only end their whole lives well with the living God. Therefore, the New Year's Festival is an opportunity for Christians to evaluate the past year and set the wrong things in their life right. The New Year's Festival is also an opportunity to make new decisions, and new choices and especially to make a new commitment to put their whole lives into the hands of the living God.

A. THE NEW YEAR'S FESTIVAL AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SELF-EXAMINATION

Introduce. The New Year's Festival is a very good time to ask yourself a few very important questions in order to help you evaluate your past year.

1. The first New Year's question: "Am I a believer?"

Read John 3:16-18,36; John 5:24; 1 John 3:9-10; 2 Corinthians 13:5.

Discover and discuss. What is the most important question anyone could ask himself?

The most important question you could ask yourself before you make a new beginning this New Year is about your salvation, "Am I a Christian or not?" 2 Corinthians 13:5 says, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you - unless, of course, you fail the test?"

Many people will begin this New Year without Jesus Christ, and thus without the living God. Everyone who does not believe in Jesus Christ is lost. His sins are not yet forgiven, the wrath of God still remains on him and he will inherit eternal punishment. Everyone who continues to sin, who does not do what is right or does not love his brother, is a child of the devil. But if anyone turns to God and believes in Jesus Christ, he will certainly not be condemned and perish, but have eternal life! He will not continue to sin, because he is born of God. He will do what is right and love his brother. And he knows that he is a child of God. Therefore, everyone should examine and test himself.

Consider. If you have never received the Lord Jesus Christ into your heart and life as Saviour, then do it now. Pray the following prayer: "Dear Father in heaven, I confess that I am a sinner and lost. I believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross as a punishment for my sins. I believe that he was resurrected and now reigns as the King of kings. I now ask Jesus Christ to come into my heart and into my life, to forgive me my sins and to give me new life. I want to learn from Jesus Christ as my Teacher and obey him as my Lord. Thank you for hearing my prayer. In Jesus' name. Amen."

2. The second New Year's question: "How have I lived during the past year?"

Read Psalm 139:1-7,23-24; John 8:32.

Discover and discuss. What is a second important question everyone ought to ask himself?

A second important question everyone ought to ask himself is, "How have I lived during this past year?" Psalm 139 is a prayer of examination. David realises that he is not perfect and not sinless. He realises that he does not always know what things in his life displease God. Therefore he asks God to show his sins to him. He prays, "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern

my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:1-3,23-24).

Consider. Doctors can only help to heal their patients when the patients acknowledge that they are sick. As long as a patient refuses to face the reality of his sickness, he will not acknowledge that he needs a doctor. But when he faces the reality of his life and acknowledges that he is sick and needs help, doctors can help him to be healed. Likewise, Jesus says, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32). Whoever faces his unrighteousness and acknowledges this to Jesus, will receive the help and healing of the best doctor in the world! Whoever believes this, will not be afraid to examine himself very deeply in order to confront those hidden fears and events of the past, because he knows that this is the best and quickest way to be healed!

Therefore, an important question you should ask yourself before you make a new beginning this New Year concerns the possibility of sin in your life. “Is there any particular sin in my life, which I have not confessed to Jesus Christ?” “Is there some hidden motive that cannot please God?” “Is there some secret sin of which I have become a slave?” “Is there a bad relationship with someone?” Think about the past year and evaluate your behaviour and words, your motives and attitudes, and the decisions and choices you have made during the past year. When you know or feel that your life has not been right, but you don’t know exactly what is wrong, pray Psalm 139 as a prayer of examination. Use this prayer in the Psalms to ask God to search your hidden motives and to test your deepest feelings. Ask God to uncover your fears, your hurt feelings and your offensive behaviour. God already knows what is hidden in your mind, heart and life, but he wants you to ask him to show it to you. God wants you to recognise and acknowledge these things, because he wants to deliver you from these things! In John 8:32 Jesus promises, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free”. *The truth about even the darkest side of your nature can set you free!*

3. The third New Year’s question: “What progress have I made during the past year?”

Read Colossians 2:6-7; 1 Timothy 4:15-16.

Discover and discuss. What is a third important question everyone ought to ask himself?

A third important question everyone ought to ask himself is, “What progress have I made during the past year?” People are living beings, and living beings either make progress forwards or regress backwards. People may think that they stand still for a while in order to deal with a specific problem. But even dealing with a problem is making progress! Only lifeless things stand still and remain as they are for a long time. The apostle Paul stimulates Timothy to make progress. He says, “Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers”.

Consider. An important question you should ask yourself before you make a new beginning this New Year is about the progress in your life during the past year. “To what extent did I live exclusively for the glory of God (Romans 11:36)?” “How did I remain in Christ (John 15:5)?” “To what extent did I make progress in my growth as a Christian or not (1 Timothy 4:15)?” “How well did I love my wife and children (Ephesians 5:25)?” “Did I work six days a week for my living?” “In what way did I contribute to God’s work and the extension of God’s kingdom (Matthew 6:33)?” “What does God want me to change or to improve during the coming New Year?” Take time to consider what you think needs changing. Consider these questions together with God by reading the Bible and by praying.

B. THE NEW YEAR’S FESTIVAL AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR DEDICATION

Introduce. Every New Year’s festival is a very good opportunity to make important decisions or choices in your life. Some of the most important decisions or choices you should make are the following: “What will be the direction of my life during the next year?” “In whom am I going to put my trust?” “What am I going to do with my time, talents, opportunities, money, etc.?” “What are my goals and priorities in life?” Let us look at the decisions and choices some people in the Bible have made. Then, make the right decisions and choices!

1. The first New Year’s decision: “I will take the right direction in my life”.

Read Jeremiah 6:16. “Stand at the cross-roads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Consider and discuss. Which road are you going to take? What will be the direction of your life during the coming new year?

An important decision or choice you ought to make before you make a new beginning this New Year concerns the direction of your life. Every New Year’s festival is like standing at a crossroad and you must make a decision whether you are going to turn left or right, whether you should go straight on or turn backwards. You should decide whether you are going to turn to God and follow God’s way, which is the good and right way, or whether you are going to turn away from God and follow the wrong way. “The good and right way” corresponds to “the ancient paths”. “The ancient paths”

refers to the way that God has revealed in the Bible from ancient times, that is, from the time of the creation forwards. Pray and ask God to show you the good and right way. Of course, you may come to such crossroads at other times in your life as well!

2. The second New Year's decision: "I will trust in the right person in my life".

Consider and discuss. Whom are you going to trust during this year?

Read Jeremiah 17:5-10. "This is what the LORD says: Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes; he will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit." The choice is between trusting human beings and the things that belong to human beings, or trusting God and his Word. Whoever puts his trust in a human being, a politician, an economist, a military leader or a spiritual leader, will become like a dry bush in the desert. But whoever puts his trust in the Lord, will be like a tree planted by the water. God warns against having any kind of an unhealthy dependent or co-dependent relationship with another person.

Read Proverbs 23:4-5; Matthew 6:25-34. People, who trust *in material things* like money and possessions, will discover that their efforts to acquire wealth will wear them out and that riches are quickly lost. People, who trust in the Lord, will not give all their time and effort to gain material things, but will first seek the kingdom of God and the things which are right in God's eyes.

Read Psalm 20:4-8. People, who trust *in military power* like horses and war chariots or modern guns, will discover that they will one day "be brought to their knees and fall". But whoever trusts in the Lord will be saved; the Lord will answer his prayers; and he will "rise up and stand firm".

Read Hosea 4:6; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. People, who only trust in human knowledge like quasi-scientific or philosophical knowledge for their lives, will discover that they have become fools in the eyes of God. But whoever trusts in the Lord and his Word will be wise! He will not be rejected or destroyed, but saved.

Read Psalm 23:1-6. People, who trust in the Lord as their Shepherd, will experience that God leads them along the right way, is present with them when they walk through the valley where death threatens and vindicates them against their enemies.

3. The third New Year's decision: " I will make progress in my life".

Consider and discuss. In which areas does God want you to make progress during this year?

An important decision or choice you ought to make before you make a new beginning this New Year concerns the area of making real progress in your life. Many people make progress only during their years in school. After that for the rest of their lives, they often go backwards more than forwards. The Lord Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul taught Christians to make progress throughout their whole lives.

Read Matthew 25:14-30. God has given every person one or more talents. A talent is literally a unit of a great amount of money. An ordinary worker in Jesus' day had to work for twenty years to earn one talent! The point of this parable is that each person must be faithful in using the opportunities, which God has entrusted to him. He should use them in such a way that God is glorified, that God's kingdom is extended and that the little ones (Matthew 25:40) are benefited. God will punish negligence, but reward diligence. Although everybody has received a different amount of opportunities in life, they nevertheless should make progress and use whatever God has given them in order to gain more.

Read Ephesians 5:15-17. Wise people are those people who walk with God and have an understanding of God's will. They aim to reach the highest goal and use the best means to attain it. They make the best use of their abilities and opportunities. In order to make progress, a person must be wise.

Read Philippians 3:7-16. Paul describes his own goal in order to stimulate the Philippians to follow his example. His purpose is to *know* Christ, to *gain* Christ and to *become like* Christ. He is aiming at ethical and religious perfection. Paul believes in election before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4) and in assurance of salvation (2 Timothy 2:19). But he does not believe in divine election apart from human responsibility, or in divine salvation apart from human responsibility, or in divine salvation without human effort, or in divine assurance of salvation without constant human use of God's promises! Although Christians cannot actually attain complete sanctification while they live in this world, they nevertheless should make progress towards it.

Read 1 Timothy 4:11-16. Paul exhorts Timothy to be diligent in setting an example in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. He exhorts him to devote himself to the public reading of the Bible, to preaching and teaching. And he urges him to watch his own *life* and *doctrine* closely. When he perseveres in these things, then everyone may be able to see his progress.

C. THE NEW YEAR'S FESTIVAL AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CLAIM GOD'S PROMISES

Introduce. In his sovereign will, God has given us a limited freedom to make choices and decisions, for which he will also hold us responsible. For example, he will hold us responsible and accountable for *believing or rejecting his teachings*. Likewise he will hold us responsible and accountable for *obeying or disobeying his commands*. But in other areas of our lives, he has not given us freedom. For example, we cannot choose the time and place of our birth, and most of the time, we cannot choose our circumstances! But God has given us the freedom to choose our attitude and reaction towards our circumstances!

Every New Year's festival is a very good opportunity to make some new commitments to God, especially to surrender to God's will. God wants us to willingly and wholeheartedly surrender to his revealed will in the Bible, that is, to choose to believe his teachings and to do his commandments. And God wants us to trustfully submit to the circumstances that he has permitted in a sovereign way in our life. Therefore, let us involve God in all the beginnings that we are going to make this year.

1. The first New Year's promise: "I will depend on God's presence in my life".

Discover and discuss. What does the Bible promise about God's presence?

An important commitment every Christian ought to make before he makes a new beginning this New Year is to depend on God's presence in his life, especially when he faces difficulties.

Read Deuteronomy 1:29-33. God himself goes before his people and he fights for his people. Wherever we as Christians will have to go during the next year, God himself will be there before we arrive there, he will be by our side and he will fight for us. As a matter of fact, God does not take difficulties away from us, but carries us through our difficulties! Just as a father carries his son all the way through the desert difficulties, so God carries us through our difficulties until we reach our final destiny!

Read 2 Kings 6:15-17. Enemies who wanted to hurt and kill them surrounded Elisha and his whole city. Elisha's servant was very afraid. Then God opened his spiritual eyes and he saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around the city, protecting them! Sometimes God will allow us to come into very difficult circumstances. While we can only see the physical dangers and enemies, God and his angels are nevertheless very real and very present! Psalm 34:7 says, "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them". In Isaiah 41:10 God promises, "Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." And in Isaiah 43:1-7 he promises, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you and when you walk through the fire, you will not be burned."

2. The second New Year's promise: "I will depend on God's grace in my life".

Discover and discuss. What does the Bible promise about God's grace?

An important commitment every Christian ought to make before he makes a new beginning this New Year is to depend on God's grace in his life.

Read Revelation 3:7-8. It is only by God's grace that God opens doors of opportunities for each Christian. He may give us an opportunity to study or to get a job or to find a marriage partner, etc. *He* opens a door of opportunity to tell other people about Jesus Christ or to serve in his kingdom. Even when other people try to close doors, Jesus says, "What I open, no one can shut, and what I shut, no one can open." The political leaders, military leaders or religious leaders of the world may shut doors in our lives, but they can only do that by God's sovereign permission! It is not they who carry the keys, but Jesus Christ! It is not they who shut doors, but Jesus Christ who permits them to shut a door. It is also not they who open doors, but Jesus Christ who in a sovereign way opens a new door for us, which no one can shut! Christians believe in the sovereignty of God and Jesus Christ. Therefore, Christians should depend on God's grace to open doors of opportunities for them during this new year!

Read Proverbs 27:1; James 4:13-17. The Bible warns that you should not boast and brag about what you will do tomorrow. Nobody knows what will happen tomorrow! Nobody knows if he will still be alive tomorrow! Therefore, a Christian depends on God's grace when he makes his plans for tomorrow and for every day of the new year. Christians say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

Read 2 Corinthians 12:9. Of course, every Christian will face difficulties (trials). But God has a purpose with the difficulties (trials) you face tomorrow or during the coming year. Paul teaches that when you face difficulties, sickness or persecution, you should depend on God's grace. God did not take Paul's difficulties away, but instead said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, you should depend on the grace of God whenever you face difficulties, sickness and persecution during the new year. God will use your difficulties, sickness or persecution to make you more Christ like and more effective.

3. The third New Year's promise: "I will depend on God's victory in my life".

Discover and discuss. What does the Bible promise about God's victory?

An important commitment every Christian ought to make before he makes a new beginning this New Year is to depend on God's victory in his life. When people read newspapers or listen to the news over the radio, they often just hear *bad news*. Nations go to war against one another; people tell lies, steal, rape and murder. Some businessmen and politicians are corrupt. Some policemen and judges do not defend the poor and helpless, but show partiality for people who can give them bribes. However, people that read the Bible always hear *good news*!

Read Romans 8:28-39. God teaches that the final victory belongs to God's people and not to the wicked and corrupt people! It says, "If God is for us, who can be against us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors!" No matter what happens to the Christian during the new year, he already knows that he will share in the final victory of God!

Read Matthew 13:41; Acts 3:21; Revelation 21:27. Whatever happens in this world is not the end. The final end of this present broken world is the second coming of Jesus, the resurrection from the dead, the final judgement and condemnation of the wicked and the renewal of heaven and earth in which only righteousness will dwell! Therefore, when you make a beginning this new year, depend on the final victory you will have at the end of all your years on earth! That end comes when you die or when Jesus Christ returns.